CORONET

Jack McClenaghan

Subzero tension in the suspenseful tradition of Alistair Maclean

The Ice Admiral

THE ICE ADMIRAL

"To stray away from the base and into the gloom behind the friendly lights meant almost certain death. The freezing wind would sap a man's strength until at last he lay thankfully down on the ice. Most likely he would imagine that he was lying down to regain his strength, and when he ceased to struggle he would feel content. Death in the heat was painful. Death in the cold was quicker, a soothing embrace that was always welcome. That was the way most men died on the ice. In the end they simply lay down."

The Ice Admiral

Jack McClenaghan

CORONET BOOKS
Hodder Paperbacks Ltd., London

Copyright © Jack McClenaghan 1969,
First published in Great Britain by
W. H. Allen & Co. Ltd., 1969
Coronet edition 1972

The characters and situations in this book are entirely imaginary and bear no relation to any real person or actual happening.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which this is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Printed and bound in Great Britain for Coronet Books,
Hodder Paperbacks Ltd,
St. Paul's House, Warwick Lane,
London, E.C.4
By Hunt Barnard Printing Ltd.,
Aylesbury, Bucks.

ISBN 0 340 12545 4

For Maxine and Wendy

PART ONE

One

ADMIRAL CANARIS, looking out of the window, watched the sun set over the Pacific. Four miles below him it was night but up where the big plane rode so easily there was the softness of the departing day. Banks of clouds rolled away endlessly, like purple hills continually changing shape as the darkness overtook them. As always the view fascinated the admiral. He watched intently until there was nothing to be seen but the wingtip navigation lights racing against the stars which now filled the sky.

The admiral enjoyed travelling, especially flying, and the odd sensation there always was at leaving one place and arriving at another so quickly. What he liked more was to feel completely in charge of the aircraft in which he was travelling even though he was not actually flying it. A word from him would turn it around to head back to Tahiti, as would the other aircraft flying somewhere behind. But he would not change his orders and nothing would stop them hurrying on to land at Christchurch in the early hours of the morning.

Turning away from the window Admiral Canaris lit a cigarette and settled back in his seat. Aircraft were the real Navy tools now, he thought. His job of maintaining and supplying five Antarctic bases could not be done without them. Ships hauled down oil and petrol and all the heavy supplies but aircraft had speed and mobility and they could shift cargo too. A thousand tons was nothing to a squadron of C130s. He was glad he had learned to fly before the war otherwise he wouldn't have got a command involving so many aircraft.

While the admiral sat in the darkness, thinking and smoking, his staff slept. For some of them it was the first time in two days that they had closed their eyes. On deciding to go to New Zealand the admiral had demanded planning and action, which he got. Even on the way from Washington to San Francisco,

where the aircraft had refuelled before taking off again for Honolulu, the conferences had continued without a break. On the flight from there to Tahiti some of them could hardly keep awake, but they knew better than to even think about sleep before they were given permission.

Now, on the last stage, from Tahiti to New Zealand, the admiral had left his staff to their own devices and they became a row of sunken heads and outstretched arms. Admiral Canaris felt inexhaustible as he walked past the sleeping figures, and climbed up on to the flight deck to stand directly behind the pilots.

They were sitting silently, looking ahead into the night and occasionally at the green-glowing instrument panels, enjoying the steady drumming of the engines and the evenness of the flight. At times their hands strayed, feeling reassuringly and adjusting the controls more from whim than from any need to over-ride the automatic pilot. This was the way they would sit throughout the night, these men in charge of the wonderful flying machines.

They turned together as Canaris appeared, resenting the intrusion but they were soothed when he acknowledged he was trespassing.

'I hope you won't mind my coming up,' he said to Major Heapy, 'but I wanted to talk to you.'

'Come in, sir,' said the Army pilot. 'I'm sure the lieutenant won't mind, will you?' he added, beckoning the admiral towards the seat.

'Of course not. I was just going for coffee any rate,' said Lieutenant McAuley, sweeping off his headset and standing up. 'Hold her steady, admiral,' he joked as he departed.

For a time the admiral looked steadily ahead enjoying the unique sensation of being thrust forward which he never experienced in a passenger's seat. He leaned over towards Major Heapy. 'Quite some aircraft, aren't they?'

'All that and more, sir. So far they've done everything we've asked them to do. You just can't fault them, take them anywhere, do anything.'

He was about to elaborate when the navigator stretched out and passed him a slip of paper. 'On course and on time,' he

announced after glancing at it. 'Is there anything you would like passed on to Christchurch?'

'Not at the moment.' Admiral Canaris leaned back contentedly. 'How long have you been involved with Operation 90 South now?' he enquired.

'Last year was my third but as the flying season ends in March and this is June, how say three-and-a-half?'

The admiral nodded approvingly.

'The usual sort of tours, I guess,' continued Heapy, 'flying down from Christchurch to McMurdo for a start and then when the ships come in, out to the bases, especially to the Pole station. As a matter of fact I did the last flight to the Pole last summer.'

'Yes, I knew it was you who went in,' the admiral remarked. 'It was getting a bit late in the season, wasn't it?'

It was getting late, Major Heapy remembered, far too late. When the weather was good the 850 mile Pole flight from McMurdo Sound, where the ships unloaded, could be quite uneventful. All the pilots used to joke about it. 'You just fly across the Ross Ice Shelf,' they said, 'It's only the size of France, up the Beardmore Glacier and then turn right.'

There was no joke about it when he had made the last flight of the season. For nearly a week they had waited while a storm swept over the icy desert of the polar plateau and the man now sitting beside him, safe then in his headquarters in Christchurch, was insistent that the weather would clear and had refused to abandon the flight.

The weather had cleared, as the admiral said that it would, and Major Heapy had flown in, but all the time he was on the ground in the minus 70 degree temperature he kept his engines running. When the time came to depart he taxied swiftly to the end of the rough runway, turned around and opened the throttles wide. At the same time he fired eight of the sixteen jet assisted take-off rockets under his wings. For ten seconds each gave him the power of an additional engine. He had had to fire the second eight to get free of the ice and to labour into the thin air. Their work done, he dropped them like bombs beyond the tiny cluster of buildings which marked the Pole station. Freed of the ice and the burden of the jato bottles the

Hercules began to climb steadily. Tiny beads of sweat had collected on Heapy's brow. A take-off 10,000 feet above sea level was never a picnic.

That, thought Major Heapy, was how I last left the South Pole, but he didn't feel like going through that whole rigmarole again. He slipped off the automatic pilot and busied himself with taking the aircraft up another 600 feet.

The admiral watched him with one eye, not minding that Heapy was climbing higher than necessary for he understood that the manoeuvre was giving him time to think. At last the aeroplane resumed level flight and Major Heapy had thought over his answer.

'It was as late as I would ever want to fly into the Pole. So far we've been lucky but the Pole is high, it's nearly eight and a half thousand feet above sea level and those low temperatures change everything as far as flying is concerned.'

The admiral smiled. 'What about those on Que Sera Sera? They didn't have an aircraft like this one.'

What was he pushing about Pole flights for? wondered Major Heapy. Everyone knew the story of Sera, the first aircraft to land at the Pole. It was years ago since the first of the ice admirals had gone in on that flight.

'What I meant,' said Major Heapy, 'is that there is a mighty big difference between flying there in spring or autumn. When Sera went in it was the end of October, continuous sunlight, and the temperature was only 60 below. When we got out of there last autumn it wasn't that far off total darkness and was 75 below and dropping fast daily. With a bit less luck we could have been stranded there for the winter.'

Major Heapy stretched forward to make an adjustment on the panel and saw the admiral's face creased with a quiet smile.

Very funny, I don't think, thought Heapy, you should try it yourself sometime.

For the moment the admiral apparently had nothing to say and, not wanting to be the first to break the silence, Heapy ran his eyes and sensitive fingers over the instrument panel, assuring himself of what he already knew, that the aircraft was flying perfectly at nearly six miles a minute. They had left the mountains of cloud behind and the night was theirs alone.

The aircraft had been named Sierra South when he took

command on their first trip to the ice and for every flight they did between Christchurch and McMurdo Sound, he had a penguin put beneath the name. The crew also painted on a barber's pole every time Sierra South landed at the South Pole. A neat row of these stood beneath the penguins, just below the side window where the major sat.

He glanced at the admiral as the lanky figure pulled itself up out of the seat. 'You going to turn in, sir?' he asked solicitously.

'Soon, maybe, but I've got some thinking to do yet. It's a fair responsibility, Major, a mid-winter flight to Antarctica.'

'If they can make a reasonable strip and give us an adequate flare-path, we'll get in and out of there O.K.,' the major said earnestly.

Admiral Canaris agreed. 'The weather is the crucial factor though. If it stays bad down there like it is now, the question is whether that little sick guy can last it out or not. As much as I'd like to go in and get him out there are a lot of lives to think about when this aircraft goes in.'

He stepped forward and squeezed the major's shoulder. 'But I'd like to see us make the first mid-winter flight down there if it's at all possible. It would just be great to be able to prove that no matter where our men are on earth we can get to them when they are in trouble.'

Another squeeze of Heapy's shoulder and Canaris was gone.

McAuley eased back into the co-pilot's seat. 'You learn much more from him?'

'Not much really,' said the major, preparing to settle back to the monotony of the flight. 'He talked a bit about Pole flights and this present one, of course, and you know as much about it as I do.'

'I suppose it is an honour to be picked to make this mid-winter landing in the Antarctic?' the lieutenant asked.

'It's just a job. We fly where we are told, when we are told. It's as simple as that. That's the Military Air Transport Service, boy.'

The admiral started to bed down for the rest of the night, being tired by the events of the past two days and because he had already flown halfway around the world in a military aircraft with its spartan appointments. He wanted to curl up in the darkness and let the steady drumming of the engines send

him to sleep and feel the sensation of floating which often came to him on a night flight. His staff was sleeping and he was alone, as he was always alone.

Lieutenant-Commander Rudolph Sciple, however, was not asleep but sitting, as he had been for hours, reaching methodically every so often for his tablets to soothe the pain in his stomach. Since the flight had started he had tried desperately to relax and free the ever tightening knots of apprehension he felt whenever he stepped aboard an aeroplane. He chewed the tablets instead of sucking them in his haste to get relief which would not come.

He smoked too, drawing the smoke into his lungs, disliking the developing bitterness of the cigarettes but unable to stop. As the admiral's senior public information officer he had known from the outset there was nothing he could do to avoid accompanying him although he had tried, even laughing in his bitter laconic way that he would not be needed.

'Come off it, Rudi,' the admiral had said, 'we fire the big guns this time.'

Working for the admiral was something Sciple genuinely liked doing and he thought that he knew him better than anyone in the service. As an information officer he was on the admiral's staff but, in a subtle way, not quite part of it. It was a privileged position where he was left almost entirely to his own devices in presenting any image of the admiral and his task force, so long as it was favourable. Commander Sciple saw himself as a smoother of ways, and a talker to pressmen, in fact, the Jack of all trades of publicity.

He was the constant sprite of alertness, of cheerfulness and hope, the man who gave bad tidings as if they were glad and good tidings, as if each and every one of them was momentous news.

He was a convincer and a fixer who knew everyone and everything, besides being everyone's friend. Behind the façade of irrepressible cheerfulness and efficiency he hid his private thoughts and attitudes, guarding them jealously. Most of all he tried to conceal his dislike of flying, condemning it to himself as unreasonable, even childish. It was with him all the same. He was a groundling.

It was two hours since Commander Sciple last talked to the

admiral about the flight south and he had been told he wouldn't be stopping at Christchurch but would go on with the admiral to McMurdo Sound.

'Of course you'll be coming along,' the admiral said matter of factly, and then forgot about it.

Commander Sciple swallowed another tablet and lit another cigarette.

Two

FROM the start the admiral knew that he would not sleep and he reached up to his jacket and took the pack of cigarettes from it. He'd smoke and think. In the first place he had to be honest with himself; the flight was not only important because they were making a night trip to Antarctica to get a sick man, but because it was dangerous.

His mind then wandered back in time to when he was aboard the USN *Oswega* as it had slid steadily towards the white shining cliffs of the Ross Ice Shelf, not yet apparent in their majesty, but merely a glow on the horizon. Then a Lieutenant-Commander, he had edged past a tractor lashed to the deck and climbed up on to the bridge. 'Good morning, sir,' he said deferentially to the officer standing beside the helmsman.

'Good morning,' replied Captain Lanteigne, 'you're up early, can't sleep or something?'

Canaris smiled. 'To tell you the truth I am really enjoying this part of the trip. It's just like sailing on a lake after what we've been through.'

It was the captain's turn to smile. 'I've been through some rough water but nothing like the past four days. The man who called them the screaming sixties certainly knew his business.'

He pointed to a huge wooden case on the deck. The top of it was staved in. Further aft, a ventilator had been squashed almost flat. 'It was a mighty big sea that did that and it just seemed to have come from nowhere.

'It's almost three years to the day since the last time I entered the Bay of Whales,' continued Captain Lanteigne. 'The last six hundred miles was like sailing through a dead world, there wasn't a breath of wind. Maybe those little ships were lucky like that, eh?'

'I don't think so, somehow,' Canaris answered.

'No, and neither do I,' the captain grimly agreed. 'That only happens once in a hundred years.'

While he was talking he walked the length of the bridge, studying the drift ice on each side of the ship. For a few moments he stood with his hands clenched behind him, his huge shoulders hunched. 'I like to know what's in store for us but with the water as calm as this you could look at it for a week and learn nothing,' he told Canaris.

'I just know one thing. We won't waste any time unloading you at the bay. I don't fancy being tied up to any wall of ice if it starts to blow. We could be battered to pieces in an hour.'

I don't blame you for that, thought Canaris. The quicker the ship was unloaded the better it would suit him. There was nearly a thousand tons of equipment, food and fuel to go ashore, to keep him and thirty men alive for a year, and he wanted every ton of it.

He had a great respect for Captain Lanteigne, but his first responsibility was to his ship, and unloading against the ice at any time was tricky. If it started to blow he would go, whether all the cargo was unloaded or not. The trouble was, would he come back?

'You can't unload her too fast for me,' said Canaris.

They came to the Bay of Whales seven hours later, a huge indentation in the glistening Antarctic coastline. This time Commander Canaris stood on the deck by himself, out of the way of the crewmen beginning to loosen the lashings on the deck cargo.

An iceberg, three miles long, was astern and the *Oswega* had altered course to give it a wide berth. Now she was turning to run parallel with the ice cliffs which had fascinated Canaris from the day he had first seen them.

That's a mighty lot of ice, he thought. The cliffs were the terminal of the Ross Ice Shelf and in places a thousand feet thick, edging slowly out to sea at the rate of four feet a day.

They moved up and down imperceptibly and icebergs were made when pieces broke off and floated away. At some time in the distant past, an enormous piece of ice had broken away. That was how the Bay of Whales had been formed. Even Amundsen in 1911 had set out from here to the South Pole. One day the ice would change again and then the bay would be no more.

For the first time Canaris felt the weight of responsibility. In a few hours he would be ashore and building the new base. In three days, or perhaps even less, the ship would be gone.

He couldn't shake off the feeling that then he'd be alone, even though all his men would be with him.

By late afternoon, with the summer sun still burning high in a cloudless sky, the unloading of the *Oswega* began. The tractors and heavy sledges were swung ashore first and then the rest of the deck cargo as fast as the derricks could shift it.

Captain Lanteigne supervised the operation himself. If a man didn't move fast enough he roared his disapproval. He strode around the decks like a lion tamer giving encouragement and abuse where he thought it necessary. He was the complete opposite to the calm officer who had guided his ship through the worst the Southern Ocean could offer, but his men understood. They had to get the ship unloaded fast because inevitably a storm would come, and when it did they would have to leave.

On the ice, Commander Canaris set his men at the same cracking pace. The tractors roared to life and began hauling the cargo two miles inland to the site of the new camp.

A hundred tons had been shifted before Canaris considered that everything was well organised enough for him to visit the camp site. When he arrived the first of the prefabricated buildings was going up. The men hardly looked up as he approached.

'What do you make of it?' he asked Lieutenant Fosbender, his executive officer.

'There's never been a camp built faster than this,' the lieutenant told him. 'Who said Rome wasn't built in a day!'

'Keep them at it,' Canaris warned. 'I want this camp finished before the weather cuts up rough. We've been lucky so far.' He took the lieutenant's arm and drew him close. 'Work them till they drop, if necessary,' he said softly.

Fosbender nodded wisely.

'One thing more. No one goes back on the ship.'

'They what?' asked the lieutenant incredulously.

'They stop on the ice and don't go back to the ship; we can't spare the time wasted with them running backwards and forwards.'

'What happens if we get a blizzard before the camp's ready? We can't survive out in the open.'

'You won't have to do that,' said Canaris. 'See over there?' He pointed to four poles sticking out of the snow a mile away to the south.

'Admiral Byrd's old camp is under there. Those are the radio masts. If we tunnel down through what's drifted over those buildings in the last three years, we'll find that some of them are in quite good condition. If necessary, that's where we'll wait it out. Now keep them at it like I told you, but don't say anything about sheltering in the old camp. They'll work like goddam galley slaves if they think that the only shelter they'll have is the one they're building.'

Commander Canaris flagged down a tractor returning with an empty sledge to the ice edge and stepped aboard it. He rode away without another word.

Fosbender stood and watched him go. What the hell was going on? he wondered. The men couldn't work any harder than they had been doing for the last few hours. He reluctantly walked over and passed on the instruction that Commander Canaris had given.

As Lieutenant Fosbender passed on he left incredulous groups of men behind him. One man threw his big gloves on the ice and jumped on them. In the crisp air, the lieutenant heard every word he said but he did not look back.

If he had, he'd have been tempted to agree.

With Commander Canaris back at the ice edge there was no one for the men to argue with, even if they had dared. They grumbled for a few minutes to each other. Then, inevitably, they got back to work.

The lieutenant became so busy he even forgot about not returning to the ship. The materials and equipment were arriving so rapidly that he had to scurry about the camp site to see that everything was dumped in the right place.

A breeze sprang up, stingingly cold, and swirled the dry

snow until it looked like ground fog. Long streamers of cloud appeared from the south, a sure sign of a change in the weather.

With a speed that the lieutenant wouldn't have believed possible, the first two huts went up. When the first one was completed a cheer went up from the men.

Fosbender crunched his way across the snow to them. For a moment they relaxed and laughed as a sign was nailed to the door.

The man with the hammer stepped back to admire his work as the lieutenant arrived. 'Men Only,' the sign said.

'Lieutenant, you think there's a chance we'll ever get any dames down here?' asked a youngster, barely twenty.

Fosbender had to peer at him to see who it was. His fur-lined hood, pulled closely around his face, and the beard he had struggled to grow for weeks, were coated with ice.

'No dame would look at you now, Johnson,' said Fosbender.

'Begging your pardon, sir, you don't look so hot yourself.'

Fosbender laughed and the men laughed with him. A few hours on the ice and they had an easy companionship never possible on a ship.

Johnson tried to rub some of the rime away with his shoulder. 'How long,' he asked, 'are we going to keep working for? Me, I'll drop soon.'

'Tell you what,' said Fosbender. 'You all can take a break at sunset.'

'At sunset.' Johnson tried to figure it out. 'Why, that'll be in about eighteen weeks.'

The lieutenant slapped him on the back. 'You're getting the message, son.'

The sky had completely clouded over when Commander Canaris next returned to the base site. Bone tired, he leaned against a case on the sledge, thinking that so far he had been lucky.

The unloading of the ship had continued without incident except when a crate had slipped and crushed a man's leg. Canaris had helped carry him away. The only reason he had rushed in and done so was to get the job moving again.

The urgent desire to get the ship unloaded ruled everything and everyone.

All the time Captain Lanteigne stayed on the bridge and

missed nothing that happened on the deck. Twice he called instructions over the loud hailer but the rest of the time his mere presence acted as a spur to the men below.

The unloading had been proceeding for nearly twenty-four hours when Commander Canaris joined Lanteigne briefly on the bridge.

'Our luck's holding,' said the captain, looking around the sky, 'as long as it doesn't start to blow any harder.'

Canaris was jubilant. 'I never thought we'd have it so good. 'They didn't last time.'

'No, and we mightn't again. You need a little bit of luck here, and I hope you haven't used up all yours yet.'

'I just hope I haven't, captain, I sure hope I haven't.' With that Canaris left the ship and got back to work.

His eyes were closed and his head was nodding as he neared the base. The sledge bumped over a ridge of ice and the jolt brought him to his senses.

Well, he thought, as he looked about, my luck is holding up here too. The buildings were going up fast. A few more hours and he would be secure.

Canaris had been worried about the aeroplane that was to make the mapping survey. If anything had gone wrong unloading it the whole purpose of building the base would have gone. With the aircraft now safely on the ice he could turn his attention once more to the camp construction.

Stepping jauntily off the sledge Commander Canaris felt he was almost getting to the stage where he could relax.

'How's it going up here?' he called to Fosbender, who had left a group of men and was striding over to greet him. His snow glasses were pushed up on his cap like an extra pair of eyes. How could he stand the glare? Canaris wondered. It hurt his eyes. Perhaps it was because he had been on the ship more than he'd been on the ice.

'I was hoping you'd come up soon,' Fosbender said, 'otherwise I'd have had to come down and see you and I didn't want to get away just yet.'

'What's the trouble?' Canaris asked. He had an ear for it.

'You notice anything unusual coming up?'

'Don't recall anything, it's just a milk run now, isn't it?'

'You sure you didn't notice anything?' Fosbender persisted.

'For God's sake, stop beating about the bush,' Canaris snapped at him.

'About a quarter of a mile in from the ice edge you must have felt a bump as the sledge went across.'

'Oh that, sure I felt it slide and jolt a bit. What of it? There was a bit of a jolt just back a piece.'

'It's the one back near the ship that's worrying me. The tractor drivers reported an hour ago that there's a crack there, a big one. I told them not to worry about it but now they say it might be getting a little wider.'

Canaris thought for a while. 'You always get cracks in the ice,' he said at last, 'you want to fly over some of the glaciers and see how they look.'

Fosbender wasn't going to be put off that easily. 'Why, I know that, but there's something about this one that I don't like. One of the drivers stopped to have a look at it. It runs straight as a die for hundreds of yards, he says.

'If you want my honest opinion it could be that chunk of ice is getting ready to break off. Think of what we'd lose, all those supplies of ours gone and the ship's tied up to the ice. What would happen to her if that ice went?'

'Easy now,' said Canaris reassuringly. 'You'll have everyone at panic stations if you go on like that.'

Fosbender grinned a little. 'I get a little excitable I guess, but you know, sir, with an hostile environment and all that sort of thing, and how many times did you tell us on the way down not to take any chances?'

Commander Canaris accepted the mild reprimand. 'Tell you what, we'll take a ride down and have a look at the crack. It may go down only a few feet.'

'Or it may come up all the way from the bottom,' said Fosbender sombrely. In a way he hoped it did because the commander seemed to think there wasn't much to get steamed up about. He was beginning to wish he hadn't mentioned the matter at all.

They rode back on an empty sledge and when they reached the crack, Canaris sent the tractor on, telling the driver he'd walk the rest of the way.

The only explanation Canaris could give himself for not noticing the crack when he had gone over it earlier was that he

must have been dozing. He walked along the crack, apparently unconcerned, and stopping every so often to look around, as if admiring the view.

Canaris was going to be a good man to spend the next twelve months on the ice with, Fosbender decided as he watched him walk back towards him. The man was sure of himself, unhurried and determined.

He was totally unprepared for Canaris's rapid orders. 'Get every man you can from the base site down here, Fosbender, keep half here at the crack and send the rest down to the ice edge. I'm not going to take any chances with this so we'll shift everything back to a quarter mile on our side of the crack for a start and from there we'll haul it up to the base.'

'You mean you think it's serious, that this ice may go out?'

'Maybe, maybe not, but we're not going to take any chances and there'll be no harm done in getting everything back safely.'

There was a lot Fosbender wanted to ask the commander but the scowl which had appeared and the get-on-with-it look stopped him. Then he remembered about the ship.

'We'd better let Captain Lanteigne know about this, he may want to leave in a hurry.'

The look from Commander Canaris stopped him from saying anything further.

'We will say nothing to anyone except to tell them what to do, and see that it's done pronto. Understand? We've got another eighty tons to unload yet and we need every ounce of it. And we won't be getting it if they think that there is any possibility that this ice is going to move. So keep your goddammed trap shut and just get things moving. I will speak to Captain Lanteigne.'

In an hour, double the number of men were handling cargo and Commander Canaris again stood on the bridge with Captain Lanteigne.

'It's shifting now,' observed the captain. 'I suppose you know what you're doing, taking it back half a mile from here and then completing the haul later on.'

'It will make things easier for us if the weather doesn't hold as good as it's been up till now,' answered Canaris. 'The men suggested it and I saw no reason for not agreeing. They are the ones who have got to go out in any kind of weather and work.'

The captain nodded non-committally. He could see no sense in the switch in cargo handling but that was Canaris's concern and not his. After all, his holds would be cleared in a few hours and he would be putting to sea. With the cargo unloaded the problems would be left on the shore.

Captain Lanteigne liked Canaris and admired the way he had driven himself and his men since the *Oswega* had arrived at the ice. It was exactly what he would have done, attempt to make everything secure before the ship sailed because they would be on their own once it was out of sight.

'You know,' said the captain, 'you never understand the size of the sea until you sail on it. I can imagine that a man doesn't know the size of this continent until he is left on it alone.'

Canaris thought for a minute. 'You sense the size of it, but you really don't realise how big it is until you fly over it. You know, there are whole ranges of mountains out there that no one's even seen yet.' He waved his arm towards the south-east. 'That's when you feel the size of it, when you're flying and you know that just close by is a place no one's ever been.'

'I think I prefer my ship,' Lanteigne answered. 'That's a dead continent, out there; on a ship you've got something alive under you.'

'You really prefer having something alive under you?' Canaris asked wickedly.

Captain Lanteigne wagged a finger at him as he answered: 'Yes I do, and so will you, many times before your year here is up. But you won't be able to do anything about it.'

'Why, captain,' said Canaris, with mock severity, 'I'm not even married.'

The captain laughed as he took the younger man's arm and steered him towards his cabin. 'You'll have little time to think about that sort of thing. Come on, I've got something that I want to give you.'

In the cabin he unlocked a cupboard and took from it a large box of cigars. Canaris accepted it, embarrassed by the presentation. His muttered thanks seemed inadequate.

'Just let's say,' said Captain Lanteigne, 'that I've got a sense of occasion and this is an occasion.'

He held up a hand when Canaris began to speak. 'Just let me say this, that you'll have your big occasions here and when

you do, pass these cigars around your officers. They're special, hand-made, and you wouldn't buy a better one anywhere.'

'When will you sail?' asked Canaris.

'Within four hours, perhaps sooner. You know I want to get away as soon as possible. There's no sense at all in delaying.'

'I shouldn't either,' Canaris replied.

'I guess it's goodbye then.' He offered the captain his hand. 'I won't be back down here again, there's too much to do up at the camp, but I'll wish you luck, and a good voyage home.'

'I wish you luck too,' said Captain Lanteigne, 'you will need it more than I.'

'Don't be too sure of that,' called Canaris as he stepped through the doorway.

On his return he found that the base was more or less secure although there were still tons of supplies waiting to be hauled up from the dump.

With Fosbender in tow he set off on a tour, going through the kitchen and mess, the sleeping quarters and small hospital, the administration and communications buildings, the ablution block, the generators and carpenters' workshop and finally the main bulk store.

In each of them they found officers and men proud of having achieved the erecting and servicing of the buildings so fast. Canaris was unstinting in his praise. The men accepted it without diffidence, feeling justly entitled to it.

They watched Canaris step jauntily around the base. 'Look at the little bastard,' said one, 'not a care on his shoulders.'

The sound of the tractors carried crisply to Commander Canaris when he woke early the next morning. There was still no wind, a reassuring thought, so he turned comfortably on to his back, put his hands behind his head and gazed at the ceiling. He tried hard to remember if it had been calm for such a long period the previous time he had been on the ice, but all he could bring to mind were uninterrupted days of murderously strong winds.

It was incredible that this time he had been so lucky. Probably never before had anyone established a base in the Antarctic in such favourable conditions. In all probability it would never happen again.

He decided that he would meet his officers that morning and

the enlisted men at night and set the camp rules that would govern their lives for the next twelve months. They were more or less the same as those always laid down by leaders of parties on the ice, just common sense to keep everyone alive.

He had no worries about discipline. All the men had been hand-picked and he knew that they would fall into easy companionship. Men doing a special job always did, but when they were so isolated into the bargain, they were the easiest in the world to command.

His thoughts were interrupted by a tap at his door and his executive officer, Lieutenant Enright, cautiously put his head around it.

'You awake?' he asked. Canaris beckoned him to come in. 'What's up?' he asked.

The lieutenant got the impression that he was interrupting the commander's morning meditation so he didn't waste any time getting to the point.

'The last tractor is due back in about twenty minutes; I thought you'd like to be there to meet it. It's quite a feat, isn't it, I mean to have everything safely up here?'

Canaris sat up, preparing to swing out of bed. 'I'll get down there but we won't have any ceremony. We can do all the congratulating later, when everything's stowed. Still fairly calm, isn't it?'

'So far, but it's colder.'

'What is the temperature now?' Canaris asked, getting out of bed and tentatively touching the frigid floor with his feet.

'About minus twenty.'

While Commander Canaris dressed quickly Lieutenant Enright, commanded to wait, gazed about the room. Its walls were bare, not a solitary picture on them. There were no photographs of family, not a single personal possession so far as he could see. It's like a monk's cell, he thought. Without a doubt it was the barest room in the whole base.

'Let's go,' said Canaris, stamping his heavy insulated boots on the floor to make sure they were tied comfortably. Enright held the door open while Canaris walked out and went down the corridor, through the double doors at the end and out into the crackling cold air.

Canaris looked across the ice plain and saw the tractor com-

ing, a steady white cloud rising from its exhaust.

'When that tractor gets here I don't want anyone going down to that ice edge,' instructed Canaris, 'and there's to be no exception to that order. If something special does come up, I'm to be consulted first. Understand?'

'Yes, I understand,' said Enright, although his puzzled look, which fled when the commander turned around to face him, indicated that he did not.

'For that matter,' Canaris added, 'no one leaves the base without permission. I can tell you from experience that in a quarter of an hour it can close in so quickly that anyone half a mile away would never find his way back.'

He's edgy, thought Enright. However, that was understandable. It was the first time that he had been on the ice and, like many others, he was vaguely aware of a danger that he could not define.

'I don't think many of them will want to go far, there's a queer feeling about this place.'

'Maybe not now, but when they get acclimatised and used to it, some of them will get venturesome,' Canaris replied. 'We lost a man that way last time. He didn't quite make it back and froze to death just fifty yards from those radio aerials over there.'

'God, that's awful,' said the lieutenant.

'We're not going to lose anyone else that way if I can help it,' said Canaris.

A group of men gathered behind the officers as the tractor approached and they waved and cheered as it came to a halt.

Ricky McCann, the driver, stood up and clasped his hands above his head and waved them triumphantly and then climbed down and solemnly shook hands with Commander Canaris.

'I had a sneaking suspicion that you might be driving because you hauled the first load up here, didn't you?' the commander enquired.

A hulking man, McCann acknowledged the commander's question with an embarrassed grin. 'I sorta set my mind on it, you know, like it's an honour to do something like that, isn't it?' he asked. The men cheered again.

Commander Canaris held up his hand for silence. 'Tell you

what, you'll have the honour tonight of heading our Antarctic log.'

'What's that, sir?' asked McCann.

'Every night we'll post a log with news of the day, weather reading, achievement and so on, starting tonight, and yours will be the first name on it. Good work, McCann,' he added warmly, 'you and the other boys have done a really first-class job. You've beaten my estimate of getting everything hauled up here by near enough two full days.' It was only a day really but Canaris was feeling generous.

A ripple of satisfaction went through the assembled men. They would have cheered again but the commander turned around and faced them.

'Let's get back to it,' he said, 'because there's plenty to do. I want this whole base as secure as Fort Knox in the next few hours because we've had a charmed life up to now but the weather's going to pack up.'

McCann drove his tractor away and the men set about their tasks without another word, stamping as they moved away to shake off the chill that had crept in during the few minutes they were standing still.

'That's a good bunch of men,' observed Enright.

As they walked back towards the base Canaris eyed the orange coloured buildings with pride. Smoke, being tugged away from narrow iron chimneys by the wind, was the main sign of habitation in the Antarctic. Smoke meant heat, hot food and warm rooms. Without heat life was impossible.

The main buildings were inter-connected by covered ways which, not being insulated, formed natural refrigerators for storing food. It was being stacked here as fast as the men could haul it inside.

A hundred yards away to the north was the building which housed the expedition's aircraft.

When it was time to eat they walked into the mess hut and took their places in the queue with the other men. Canaris was following the tradition that in the mess room there was no privilege. He got his own plate, knife and fork, picked some rounds of toast off a rack and held out his plate to be laden with a small mountain of scrambled eggs and then found his way to a table.

Enright followed suit and then went away and got two cups of coffee, a favour the commander acknowledged with a brief nod as he devoured the eggs. He was hungry.

'Not bad this, just like farm eggs.'

Enright tried his and agreed. They were specially processed pasteurised frozen shelled eggs, he explained, specially planned for use as scrambled eggs and omelettes, and there were also powdered eggs for use in baking.

'This'll be the best fed expedition there's ever been down these parts and did you know, just to provide the ration with a bit of the Southern touch, we'll even be serving up black-eyed peas, hominy grits, rice and frozen collards?'

'More than an army marches on its stomach,' said Canaris, finally putting down his fork. He sipped his coffee. 'Well, we'll be marching soon, we'll get the first field parties out right after the storm.'

Canaris got up and went over to the coffee urn to refill his cup. Enright watched him, speculating whether he liked the commander or not. On the ship Canaris had been affable and friendly enough but since they had landed on the ice he had been different, prowling around the base so much that the men were calling him 'Tiger' behind his back.

As Commander Canaris wandered back, Enright again noticed his eyes. They were the bluest and clearest eyes he had ever seen and at the moment they were neutral. But he had seen them blaze and, although narrowed by half-closed lids, they showed the fire burning white hot behind them. They were unpleasant eyes then.

Canaris was one of those men who, when he went away, left a surfeit of presence. He was too unpredictable for those in his company ever to feel completely relaxed.

'I'm going to set up an advance base a couple of hundred miles inland,' said Canaris as he sat down.

'Are you?' said Enright, showing interest and trying to remember if he had heard the commander mention it before.

'I've been thinking about this for the last two or three days,' Canaris added. 'I don't see any sense in aircraft not knowing what kind of weather it is out there and they would just waste time and gas if they flew someplace and couldn't see or photograph anything when they got there.'

He took a pencil from his pocket and drew a sketch of the ice shelf on the table top. 'We are here, and I propose we set up the weather base there. Now all the massive movement of cold air is down from the polar plateau, that's the weather maker.'

Commander Canaris's pencil stabbed down on the table. 'If we've got men out there they'll not only know the weather where they are, but they'll have a far better conception of what it is like to the west and east, which are the very areas we want to photograph.'

Enright studied the table plan. 'Why not put it another hundred miles further south?'

'No,' said Canaris with finality. 'It would be better but that is too far out. We haven't got the time to send a trail party out three hundred miles and it'd be too far away from us if there was any trouble.'

'What sort of trouble you got in mind, commander?'

'Just trouble,' said Canaris leaning forward. 'You name it, we've got it on the ice.' He accepted a cigarette from Enright and struck a match.

'Those planes,' he said at last, 'will take photographs and explore areas far beyond the reach of the men on the surface, even far beyond the reach of places where ground parties could ever go. That's something to work for, isn't it?'

There was no resisting Canaris when he wanted to be persuasive. After a few minutes Enright was enthusiastic.

The rest of the morning passed quickly for Commander Canaris and when he had completed his rounds he was satisfied that the base was functional and he felt completely in command of it.

Three

WITH nothing required of him at the moment, Canaris decided to inspect the old base where he had wintered on his last trip to the ice so he set out to find Lieutenant Fosbender to take with

him. Finding him he gave Fosbender his orders. 'Get two men with shovels and lights and we'll go over and have a look at the old base.'

With contained excitement Canaris led the party over the ice to the abandoned camp. He knew it was his curiosity but he didn't care.

After twenty minutes of hard digging the men had carved a tunnel down through the hard-packed snow and Canaris and Fosbender crawled down after them and assisted in forcing a door.

Grunting and straining Canaris wriggled his way in first. He stood up, playing a lamp around the walls while the others joined him.

'It's like a tomb,' whispered Fosbender. Ice sparkled on the walls as the lamps swept over them and there was a musty smell in the air. The snow had found its way in through cracks and crevices and where it had settled it had become hard, slippery ice. Commander Canaris took an incautious step and nearly fell over.

He tried to remember what the room had been once used for but couldn't recognise anything. They strained at another door and gained entry to a larger room which was immediately recognisable as the mess.

There was a thin covering of ice on the floor but apart from that the room was almost as the men had left it three years before.

The forms were still grouped around the table, the dishes stood in their racks on the wall and the cups on their hooks. In a corner was a pile of magazines. On the wall by the oil-fired stove was a large calendar, each day marked off with a large cross.

One of the men began opening the cupboards. 'There's a ton of food here,' he called, 'anyone could live here for months on what's left.'

'The ship came one day,' said Canaris, 'and we left. Most things were just left as they were. We just turned our backs on a year and went down to the ship.'

'We could use some of this stuff,' suggested Fosbender. 'We'll do no such thing,' Canaris replied quickly. 'Nothing here will be touched, that's the way the men would want it.'

Why, he wondered, didn't they understand that apart from the huts, the expedition had left no trace or record that it had ever existed.

'Let's try through here,' he said, shrugging it off, and making towards another door. There was no difficulty in getting it open but within a few paces their way was blocked by a solid mass of ice.

'You want us to try and dig in from the other end?' asked Fosbender.

The commander shook his head. 'Not now. Later on, perhaps, if we get a chance, there's too much to do rather than waste time here.'

Fosbender was relieved. For him it felt unnatural to be in the submerged buildings and he began to lead the way back.

Suddenly the building creaked and then shuddered gently for a few seconds. The plates in the cupboard rattled briefly.

Fosbender leapt towards the narrow opening. 'Let's get out of here, it's an earthquake,' he cried.

Canaris pulled him back. 'Don't be a damned fool. Stand here a minute and listen.'

After straining and listening and hearing nothing, Commander Canaris shone his lamp on the lieutenant. 'You know what that was?'

Fosbender looked back blankly at him, his face drawn, and shook his head.

'That was the ice at the bay going out, it was the shock wave of it breaking off we felt.'

'You mean at the crack, that ice?'

'I'm certain of it, there'll be a big new iceberg out in the bay, nothing else except one breaking off would send a tremor like that through ice like this. After supper tonight we'll take the men down and they can have a look at the iceberg.'

Later that evening Commander Canaris led his men down to the ice edge, and they stood in wonder at the new iceberg a quarter of a mile offshore. Various estimates were made of its length and by common assent it was agreed that it was between four and five miles.

The break had been a clean one, as if a cleaver of gargantuan proportions had fallen and taken a slice from the ice shelf.

A group clustered around Canaris, one question following

another. 'Steady now, steady,' he called, holding up a gloved hand and waving the men to silence, 'don't jabber like a lot of old women, one at a time.'

Ricky McCann brushed his way up to the commander. 'Is that big as icebergs go?'

'As icebergs go that's about as big as a row boat compared with a battleship.'

'No kidding.' McCann was trying to make the comparison in his own mind.

'It don't seem to be moving.' McCann was puzzled by that.

'Wind won't shift it much, the current's what will shift it, but it'll probably run aground some place and lie there for years till it melts a bit and then it'll drift on again. How long a big berg will last is anyone's guess. I'd say fifteen or twenty years, so long as it didn't get too far north, into warmer water.' The men's interest was stimulating and Commander Canaris was enjoying it.

'You know what I've been thinking?' observed Fritchey, one of the cooks. 'If the ship had been there when that berg had broken away she'd have been sunk as sure as God made little green apples.'

Canaris was deceptively casual in his reply. 'Oh, Captain Lanteigne is too old a hand in the ice to get caught like that.'

A shout from Lieutenant Enright, standing thirty yards away with another group, terminated the questioning.

'You see it?' he called, pointing to a swirl in the black water. At that instant, almost immediately below the place where Canaris and his men were standing, four black bulks rose from the water briefly and then slipped under the surface again.

'Killer whales,' said Commander Canaris. As he spoke the four whales rose together again, white water exploding upwards as they broke the surface.

'Those,' said Canaris, pointing to the place where the killers had risen, 'are the wolves of the Antarctic. They'll kill a man quicker than any shark.'

'What they do,' continued the commander, 'is to rip the tongue out of the blue whales, some of them are a hundred feet long, and then they leave the rest of the carcass. That's what they're like. They eat penguins too, I've seen them do that.'

The killers had disappeared as mysteriously as they had

arrived but they had left a sense of dread behind them.

For once, thought Canaris, killer whales had served a useful purpose as, at precisely the right moment, they had changed the topic of conversation. He now sensed it was the right time to return to the base.

'Right,' he ordered, 'let's go home.'

Home, thought Lieutenant Fosbender, what a peculiar thing to say, but the more he thought about it the more it occurred to him that Canaris really felt it was home. Anywhere he had a command was where his home would be.

An hour-and-a-half later Commander Canaris set out his rules for the base to all the men assembled in the mess room. It was an informal meeting and everyone was enjoying the luxury of not having to wear the heavy cold-weather and windproof clothing. The room was full of thick blue smoke, which drifted lazily towards a ventilator. Canaris stood with his back to the stove.

'We're all equal down here,' he began, 'but some are more equal than others and so I'm claiming the right to stand with my back to the stove.' When the brief chuckling had ended he plunged earnestly into an explanation of the simple set of rules he had set.

No one was to leave the environs of the camp without permission, and those who had to go somewhere had to report to the duty officer where they were going and what time they were expecting to get back.

'If you're not back then we'll come looking for you and heaven help the men responsible for starting a search for nothing.'

Men outside the base were to travel in pairs and constantly watch each other, especially when it was blowing, for frostbite.

'You'll see a white patch on the end of a man's nose and that's frostbite; watch for chins and cheekbones too. Brisk rubbing will help thaw them out.'

The commander talked for half an hour, emphasising that all his rules and strictures had only one purpose in mind, and that was to keep men alive in a hostile environment.

'There is one last point I want to make,' he said. 'We expect and demand the utmost resourcefulness from field parties and those of you who will be manning the outposts. You'll be far

from here and if you get into trouble you'll have to get yourselves out of it. Those of you who've been out in the field before will know that you're almost beyond the limits of help once you're out further than a hundred miles from here, especially in bad weather. If you want to wake up frozen on judgement day, just don't take any notice of what I've been saying.'

Three days later Lieutenant Fosbender's tractors rumbled across the Desert of Dreams to set up a weather base two hundred miles inland. Every mile put security and comfort behind him. When the base camp had finally vanished into the blinding whiteness his tractors crawled like ants through a galactic emptiness and his men started to learn about the hostility of space.

Riding in the lead tractor, Fosbender sat upright, staring straight ahead and saying little to the driver, miserably contemplating the weeks that lay ahead.

The happy crooning of McCann as he held the tractor on a steady course irritated him.

What did the man have to be happy about? He decided that McCann was just too dumb to know anything of the hardships he would have to endure in the next few weeks.

'You've been very quiet, lieutenant, making plans?' asked McCann.

Fosbender took his snow glasses off and polished them carefully. 'Not really. It's depressing, isn't it, just nothing out here but snow and ice.'

McCann laughed. 'You know, I enjoy it, I sure do. I don't know much about philosophy and that crap but when you're way out here, on your own, a man gets time to think, sorta sees things differently. Like he was seeing them for the first time really.'

'What sort of things?'

'Well, back home, I'd say to myself, Ricky McCann, what are you doing? where are you going? but I wouldn't get no answer. But down here, thousands of miles from anywhere, everything seems clear to me; it's like looking at myself from a long way off. You understand?'

Rubbing his chin, Fosbender thought about that. 'You are more introspective here maybe?'

'I don't know about that,' replied McCann in a puzzled

voice, 'I didn't have a college education.'

'We could put it another way, that away from hustle and bustle you can examine your own thoughts and feelings better?'

'Something like that,' McCann agreed. He was sharp enough to perceive the delicate way the lieutenant had rephrased the question in a manner he understood and he was grateful for it.

'You've got a big job out here,' he observed, 'you can count on all of us.'

'Thanks,' said Fosbender, preparing to settle back into silence once more.

Turning around, Lieutenant Fosbender watched the other two tractors which were following less than a hundred yards behind.

They were like ships in a convoy. Next week, with his camp established, they would be returned to base, and he was sorry that McCann was going back with them. The weather post wouldn't have been so bad, Fosbender thought, if all the men were like McCann. On the other hand, he didn't know them at all. Perhaps they were better than he thought.

As the miles crept by the lieutenant found himself growing determined to succeed in setting up the weather station and maintaining it without a fault.

Whether he wanted to prove something to Canaris, or was somehow growing stronger in himself, he didn't know. What he did know was that only ten hours after setting out he was becoming a different man. Perhaps, he decided, there was a chemistry that operated in vast space that couldn't be understood at all, and it was working on him.

They stopped for the night, black spots in the white wilderness. 'Pull up now, we'll stop here for the night,' Fosbender instructed McCann.

'Night?' joked McCann, 'with the sun still shining up there?' He indicated the sun which never set but made a great circle in the sky.

'For the night,' snapped Fosbender irritably. 'You heard me.'

His authoritarian tone stopped any more backchat from McCann. Slowly he turned the tractor in a semi-circle and came to a halt. The other tractors drew up beside them.

Fosbender climbed down on to the ice. 'Come around in a circle,' he instructed, 'we'll put the tents in the middle, where

we'll have some sort of shelter if it blows hard.' Ponderously the tractors hauled the sledges into a circle and halted with their engines roaring until Fosbender signalled his approval.

When the motors cut and coughed themselves into silence there was only the singing of the wind, a barren song in the emptiness. As soon as they left the shelter of the canopies on the tractors, the men felt the sting of it.

'I'm as stiff as a board,' one complained.

'You'll be stiffer than that soon if we don't get the tents up,' Fosbender told him. He stood by supervising the erection of the orange-coloured tents but did not interfere. The men worked quickly and efficiently. Nobody had to tell them twice that they had to provide themselves with shelter and warmth as quickly as possible. Within half an hour everyone was snug, the camp secure and food cooking on the portable stoves.

After the meal Fosbender instructed McCann, 'Go get the others to step in here, there's a few things I want to say to everyone.'

They crowded in, rummaging around until they found a comfortable position in which to lie down or squat. Fosbender sat on a box facing them.

'We made good progress today,' he began 'and if we can keep this up we won't have any trouble at all. We'll try for a longer run tomorrow, starting earlier and stopping later.'

Everyone agreed with that. Might as well be uncomfortable on the tractors while moving forward as uncomfortable in the tents and making no progress at all, was the way McCann saw it.

'We'll have a talk like this every night,' said Fosbender when he finished discussing the day's run. 'Anyone who has got any ideas or anything like that should bring them up, and we'll settle down into a good team.'

'Sure will,' said McCann, starting to get up.

'Just a minute, there's another thing I want to say.' Fosbender had nearly forgotten.

'Before we get going in the morning I'm going to get me some hot water and I'm going to shave. I'm going to shave at least once a week until we get back to the bay again.'

All of the men had beards and they looked at Fosbender with

amazement, even hostility. McCann with his quick mouth protested for them all.

'It's traditional to grow beards on the ice.'

'I personally believe the tradition's stupid. I'm not ordering anyone to do anything about this but you just hear me out and then make up your own minds what you do.'

'I don't care about the traditions but what I do care about is that beards and long hair have a tendency to freeze to clothing and it is painful to get them free. And there's another thing, in really cold conditions a pillar of ice will form from your beard to your clothing and it'll pipe off heat from the body and that'll be heat you can't afford to lose.'

'It's a great theory,' said McCann, amid chuckles from the others, 'but does it work out in practice?'

'Ever seen a bearded Eskimo, or a picture of one?' Fosbender asked.

McCann toyed with his beard, thinking hard. 'Can't say I have.'

'You won't either. Eskimos with practically no hair on their head or face run around as warm as toast while heavily bearded Americans enveloped in their scientifically designed clothes freeze.'

'If you've got any sense,' he continued, 'you'll either get rid of your beard or you'll keep it under cover on cold nights. You'll find that this makes getting up a much less clogged and painful business.'

This time McCann got to his feet. 'You know, you could be right lieutenant, I'm going to think about that.' There was a murmur of agreement behind him.

'Another thing. You've all been warned, but remember to stay on the lookout for frostbite.

'O.K. that's it,' said Fosbender to indicate the meeting was over. Everyone stood up and followed McCann outside. 'C'mon, you guys,' he said, 'once round the block before we turn in.'

Alone in the tent, Lieutenant Fosbender couldn't help feeling pleased with himself. He'd never approached men so confidently before. He hadn't felt awkward as he had done so often in the past. The men, he hoped, were beginning to have confidence in

him. Humming happily, he began to record the day's events in his diary.

A tide of laughter reached him as he began to write and he paused to listen. Whatever was going on out there was really funny. He got up to investigate and drew the tent flap aside just in time to see Holt, the youngest in the party, rush at McCann, his fists flailing.

McCann, twice the size of the youngster, pushed him off easily, but Holt charged in again. Some of the men grabbed him and pulled him back as Fosbender came striding up.

'What's going on there?' he demanded. McCann grinned. 'We were just having a bit of a joke.'

'I'll kill the bastard,' screamed Holt, struggling violently trying to break away.

'Stop this bloody nonsense,' Fosbender ordered.

Reluctantly Holt stopped struggling and was released. Fosbender turned around to McCann, his eyes blazing, the colour flushing into his face. 'I'm waiting,' he snapped.

McCann looked at the ice. 'He can't take a joke, I was just having a bit of fun.'

'I want to know what happened.'

'Well,' began McCann, hesitantly, 'most of us were standing just over there relieving ourselves and we all finished fairly quickly except for Holt there, who must have had a full bladder 'cause he kept going. Niagara Falls had nothing on him, and so just when he finished it was fresh in my mind what you'd been saying about frostbite, so I decided to have a bit of a joke with him.'

'You rotten bastard,' said Holt rushing forward. Fosbender pushed him back impatiently and turned to McCann again. 'Get on with it.'

'Well, I said to him, "Hell, you've got a white spot on the end of your wonk, you've had it out too long," and he has a quick look and his imagination works overtime because he says to me, "What'll I do?" '

A flicker of a grin passed over McCann's face. 'I said to him, "Remember what the commander said, rub it hard", and that's just what he did.'

McCann couldn't control himself. He threw back his head and roared with laughter. 'He had a half fat before he realised

we were putting him on.'

When he got the mental picture Fosbender had an almost overwhelming desire to laugh himself. Not a glimmer of mirth showed on his face though. 'Go to my tent and wait there, both of you,' he said coldly.

'The rest of you,' he ordered, 'check those tractors and sledges, see that all the lashings are secure and everything is ready to move off in the morning.' He stood watching as they went about their tasks and then returned to his tent.

McCann and Holt stood stiffly before him and Fosbender eyed them both severely.

'You,' he said to Holt, 'are a fool for not having the wits to see when your leg is being pulled, and you, McCann, are asking for it if you make trouble. If there's one thing I'm not going to stand for it is anyone making trouble in this party.'

McCann looked straight ahead. 'If I have any more trouble from you I'll shop you. Understood?'

A slight nod was McCann's confirmation.

'You will apologise to Holt and shake hands with him.'

'I apologise,' said McCann genuinely, and shook Holt's hand.

'Now get outa here,' Fosbender ordered.

Holt walked straight out of the tent but McCann paused near the lieutenant. 'It wasn't his leg that was being pulled,' he whispered, and then he was gone.

His duty done, Fosbender sat down and enjoyed the silent mirth rollicking about inside him. It was almost hurtful not to be able to laugh out loud.

A funny thing, he thought, a week ago he wouldn't have appreciated a joke like that. What a character that McCann was.

Four

THE STORM had passed and the sun again shone victoriously. For two days Commander Canaris had been unable to go outside while the blizzard tried to remove the obstructing buildings

in its path and the whirling snow searched for ways to enter them.

The new snow covered the scars that were made when the base was being erected and it smoothed down the ugly heaps of empty crates and rubbish there had been no time to haul away.

'It looks like an Antarctic base now,' Canaris said to Lieutenant Enright as they walked around.

'I'll never get used to it,' the lieutenant told him. 'I just can't sleep when the wind is howling like that.'

Canaris chuckled grimly. 'You will, you know. You've got a whole winter ahead of you listening to the wind and you'll sleep all right, or else you'll go mad, just walk out into it and never be seen again.'

Enright grimaced. 'What a way to go.'

'Just you remember that there might be men here who can't stand the night. Let them see us weaken and the whole place will go to pieces.'

They reached the shelter where the aeroplane was housed and Lieutenant Seffrin, one of the pilots, came out to meet them.

'How's it going?' Canaris asked.

'All set,' Seffrin replied eagerly, 'we get the word and we go.'

'No, not yet, not until the weather station is operating,' Canaris stated firmly.

Seffrin wasn't put off that easily. 'But the weather's so good now, look at it, not a cloud in the sky,' he protested.

'I fly too,' Canaris reminded him, 'that's one of the reasons I'm in charge here. Our main job is mapping and photography. We've got one aeroplane to cover an area as big as Europe, you think I want to lose it?'

'Army pilots also know something about the weather.'

'There's no Army pilot here who's had experience on the ice and I have.' Canaris was becoming annoyed.

'Look,' he added reasonably, 'they've been held up for a few days but inside a week we'll have a station out there that will give us hours of warning of the weather. You don't know how fast it can come up here. What say you arrived back here to find a blizzard like it started up on Thursday?'

Seffrin cut in. 'They didn't give us any warning of that.'

'Because they're new to it and they did something they shouldn't have done. They all went to sleep together and they had no one on watch. They slept through the first two hours of it and by that time it was here. It's a mistake they won't make again.'

'O.K., but we didn't come down here to sit around on our asses doing nothing,' Seffrin added defensively.

'You'll sit on them so long in that plane that they'll feel like lead before I've finished with you,' Canaris replied cheerfully. The brief encounter was over and he walked on.

The exchange puzzled Lieutenant Enright. 'Couldn't you have let them do a little local flying, just to get their hand in?' he asked.

Wearily Canaris stopped and turned around. 'What's in shortest supply here? Aviation gas. How much did it cost to get it here? Over five dollars a gallon, according to my calculations. You think we want to use it for joy-riding?'

The point had been completely overlooked by Enright. 'Guess not.' He realised that he should have worked them out for himself. But as they walked on he figured out Canaris a proper bastard who has all the answers.

No matter what his qualifications, Canaris ran a good base, as Enright was forced to admit to himself. Canaris was always on the move, looking and questioning though seldom interfering. There was also no doubt that he had a capacity for judging wisely and even benignly at times.

The Saturday night incident proved that as far as Enright was concerned. It was a camp rule set by Canaris that everyone could relax on Saturday night. As soon as the tables were cleaned down the beer was brought out.

It was good for everyone, Canaris said, to relax now and again and for the men to have something to look forward to. There was no place to go and nothing to do except make their own fun and they had a free rein to do that on Saturday night.

Enright had grown apprehensive as the Saturday night progressed. A small group was drinking heavily and becoming boisterous. All of a sudden, their arms linked, they swung into the middle of the room and began a wild dance. Another group started stamping their feet and clapping their hands and the men on the floor whirled faster as the beat became frenzied.

Sitting at a table playing cards, Commander Canaris took no notice of them. It seemed to Enright that he hadn't even noticed them or the din they were making. He spread his cards out carefully and rearranged them before he made his bid.

Just then the ring of men came skittering across the floor, whooping and laughing. Those in their way moved out of it, all except the card players, held fixed in their seats by the unperturbed attitude of Canaris.

With a crash the dancers lunged into the table, upsetting it and knocking the card players to the floor.

The gramophone was stopped and the room became oppressively silent as Canaris got to his feet and dusted himself down. The dancers stood in front of him, drunkenly awkward. Everyone waited.

'I think,' Canaris said slowly and evenly, 'we should get one thing straight about Saturday night.' He paused with telling effect until he had perfect silence.

'If you have to make fools of yourselves, remember not to do it in public.'

He sat down and picked up the cards again.

That was, Enright decided, the perfect way to handle the situation. Canaris set the limits for Saturday night without defining them, but everyone understood.

The base settled to a steady routine which was broken only on Saturday nights. The rest of the time it worked to rules and timetables, staying constantly in touch by radio with the field parties, the weather station and the aeroplane which flew into the distance and pointed its cameras at mountains under so great a burden of ice that only their tops showed.

Every day Commander Canaris reminded the men that the sole purpose of the base, and the only reason for its existence, was as a support force.

'But the heart beats here,' he was fond of saying. 'If it stops, everything stops.'

He knew from experience that boredom would occasionally make the men wish that they were out with the field parties and that the terrible days experienced out there would make those men long for the comforts they were missing.

What he didn't realise was that he too would chafe at the limits base life imposed. The first time he realised it was hap-

pening to him was when he thought about sending an exploring party up on to the Polar Plateau, five hundred miles away, the great ice sheet that formed the bottom of the world. Every time he looked at the map it seemed tantalisingly within reach.

The thought bugged him so much he mentioned it to Enright one night during their evening meal, but casually, not as a definite proposition.

The lieutenant played thoughtfully with his spoon. 'Maybe that's something that could be done next time. All the trail parties are really doing now is covering on the ground the areas that the aircraft photographed three years ago, aren't they?'

Canaris agreed. 'That's right, you have to back up aerial photography and mapping with trail parties to really know what the country's like.'

But as he replied he was generating even more ambitious thoughts.

'Look,' he said briskly, and traced a curve with his knife along the table top, 'why not start here and make a journey right across the continent?'

Enright looked up and saw Canaris's eyes gleaming excitedly, waiting for his answer. Then he looked back at the curving mark the knife had left, trying to imagine that it had been drawn on a map and calculating the distances involved.

'That'd be a journey of maybe sixteen or seventeen hundred miles.'

'But not as bad as you might think,' answered Canaris. He drew on the table top again. 'The worst part is getting up the glaciers, think of them as stairways, call them rivers of ice or what you like, but they're the way to get up on to the plateau. After that it wouldn't be so hard.'

'Anywhere you get ice under pressure you get crevasses. It could take weeks to get up a glacier, especially hauling heavy equipment,' Enright objected. 'Look what happened to Captain Scott, he made it to the Pole but he didn't make it back.'

Canaris swept the objections aside. 'I wouldn't win any medals from the British for saying it but Scott . . . well, I think he had the wrong food, the wrong equipment and the wrong men. The British are always talking about Scott, it's part of their Antarctic tradition, but what they forget is that Amund-

sen, who knew how to handle ice, went to the Pole and back like nobody's business.'

He's serious, thought Enright. The whole idea was getting out of hand so far as he was concerned. 'You've got to reduce this to a problem of logistics. That's the only way to talk about it. Anyone who doesn't is only guessing.'

The commander intervened. 'That's what I'm doing right now. It'd be a two-season operation. The first year the party that was going to make the crossing would lay out supply lines from here, up on to the plateau and on towards the Pole, then it would come back and winter over.' He drew again with his knife.

'We'd also set up a base on the other side and it would lay out fuel and food depots towards the Pole and then it would return and winter over. Then the next spring we'd set out from here and go right across, picking up the food and fuel we'd laid out, and once past the Pole we'd make use of the other depots. I'm certain, now I think about it, that it could be done.'

'There would have to be a reason to get funds for it, what would it be, adventure or science?' Enright asked.

'Use your imagination,' urged Canaris. 'Call it the last great journey of exploration it's possible to make on earth.'

In spite of himself, Enright was seeing the feasibility of it, especially if Canaris was to be the leader. Who was it who told him that the only thing that would grow on the ice was a man's imagination. Jeezez, that was true. The commander had started out with a seed of an idea and it was sprouting and spreading all over the Pole and beyond.

'You're not with me,' Canaris growled, 'you haven't heard a thing I've been saying in the last two minutes, what are you thinking about, some dame?'

'That wouldn't do me much good here.' Enright uncrossed his legs and stood up. 'You want some more coffee?'

As Enright reached down towards the empty cups, Canaris put his hand on his arm and tugged. 'Sit down for a minute and hear this. If we went to work on this crossing idea, I mean really went to work on it as a logistical study, we could break the back of it before we go home and at that stage, all we'd have to do is sell Washington on the idea.'

Canaris let go of Enright's sleeve. 'It won't be as difficult as

you think. The trouble in planning something like this is thinking too small. Think big and everything will fall into place. I've seen it happen time and again.'

This time Canaris stood up. 'Let's go, I've given you enough to think over to last you a while. I don't want any more coffee.'

They parted at the door, Canaris to go on one of his unceasing inspections, Enright back to his quarters.

He didn't know what to make of Canaris, Enright decided, flopping down on his bunk. Undoubtedly he was a man with brains and courage, he ran a good base, the high morale proved that.

But the trouble was he had just too much imagination. Once it started working there was no telling what he would do next.

The return of the tractors led by Ricky McCann brought the Saturday night activities to a halt temporarily and emptied the recreation room.

The tractors came up in line abreast and stopped in front of Commander Canaris. Stiff from the long hours of sitting, McCann climbed down awkwardly, bending slightly at the knees as his feet reached the ice, but he stood up straight and gave Canaris a brisk salute.

For a moment the commander stared at McCann trying to work out what was different about him but before he could decide the rest of the men were laughing and joshing the drivers.

They were all clean shaven.

'My, you look pretty,' a black-bearded cook teased McCann, 'is that your face I'm looking at or a baby's bottom?'

McCann swung around, his eyes blazing. 'What would you know about it?' he demanded.

The exchange came to a sudden end when Commander Canaris stepped up to McCann, his hand outstretched. 'Welcome back, McCann, you and your boys have done a really first-class job.'

The firm grip was returned by McCann after following the commander's example in taking off his gloves. 'It's good to be back, commander,' he said earnestly.

'A wash-up and a meal, that's what you need and we'll soon organise that for you.' Canaris passed on and shook the hands of the other drivers, congratulating them on their safe return.

The ring of men pushed in closer. 'C'mon, Ricky,' the cook persisted, 'tell us what happened to your beard.'

McCann glowered but Canaris came round again. 'Just what did happen to your beards?'

'When that son of Borgia clears off and starts getting my meal, I'll tell you all.' McCann's temper was subsiding. 'It's like this, sir, Lieutenant Fosbender's got a theory that you keep warmer if you don't have a beard, he reckons it pipes heat off from the body and that's the reason Eskimos don't have them.'

'But he's got one himself.' Canaris remembered how Fosbender had started growing his beard at the start of the voyage.

'Not any more he don't. He comes up with this theory one night and the next morning he shaved his off so everyone said that if it's good enough for him to try it, we'd do it too, and we reckon it works.'

'You don't say.' Canaris rubbed his beard thoughtfully. The bit about the Eskimos intrigued him. Maybe it was right.

'Well, no sense in standing around out here in the cold,' he said briskly. 'Come in and clean up and have a meal, then we'll have a talk.'

An hour later McCann related his trip to the commander in detail, and found he had a patient listener who didn't interrupt.

'You know the lieutenant, well he seemed to me kinda nervy before we started but once he got out on that trail he was a changed man. You'd have thought he had been doing it all his life and he was always making all kinds of experiments.'

'Like what?' asked Canaris.

McCann grimaced when he thought about it. 'One night it was cold, easy 40 below and blowing and the lieutenant said that if a man had the right food and the right clothes he could stay outside in those conditions and work for hours. We said that was impossible, so to prove us wrong he went outside and he stayed out there for more than three hours. I'd never have thought it possible, but he didn't seem much worse when he got back inside, just a little bit of frostbite on the face.'

'He did that?' Canaris was finding it hard to believe that Fosbender had endurance like that. Still he wasn't going to say so in front of McCann.

'Tell me, after sledging out there and back, just how long a

journey do you think could be made, if everything was organised properly?'

'Funny thing you should ask that, the lieutenant spent a whole evening talking about it.'

'And what did he say?'

'He reckons that with good tractors, the best in cold weather clothing and the right food, and a really good system of depots, it would be possible to make a summer journey from one side of the continent to the other.'

Canaris couldn't conceal his surprise. He sat back in his chair and stared at McCann. 'He didn't!'

'He did sir, and once again we ended up by agreeing with him. Someone's going to do it one day.'

Canaris leaned forward. 'I'm going to let you in on a little secret of mine. That's exactly the sort of journey I've been thinking about.' He was tempted to say more, but he decided against it.

'I've kept you here talking long enough,' he announced, 'go get yourself some sleep. We'll have another talk some other time.'

For half an hour after McCann left, Canaris sat thinking. Fosbender was beginning to sound like a candidate for the long haul. It occurred to him that it was hard to judge what a man was really like until he was put to some sort of test. From what he'd heard about Fosbender he'd undergone a complete change since he led the trail party out. The responsibility of having men in his care who depended on him had apparently brought that about.

In the next two weeks Commander Canaris went on two flights in the aircraft piloted by Lieutenant Seffrin. It was the first break he'd had since arriving on the ice and he was elated and excited when the skis slid and shuddered over the ice and the aircraft finally lifted off and climbed on a steady course to the east.

To the left the ice shelf was a dazzling white expanse which finally lost itself in a haze. To the right its cliffs were lapped by a narrow strip of black sea and beyond that lay the pack ice, rolling away like some vast ploughed prairie. Towards the horizon was a motionless iceberg. Canaris thought it was pro-

bably the one that had broken away from near the camp site.

He leaned forward and tapped the pilot on the shoulder. 'We'll take a look at that berg on the way back.'

The lieutenant half looked over his shoulder and assented.

At three thousand feet they levelled off and flew parallel to the cliffs but slowly drifting northwards and after half an hour, when they were twelve miles out to sea, Seffrin banked and turned towards the ice shelf again.

'No sense in staying out over water if we don't have to,' he shouted to Canaris. 'If something goes wrong and we go down there you know what happens.' He snapped his fingers.

'That's O.K. by me, time we were going back anyway,' Canaris replied. The sameness of the ice cliffs and the pack below was starting to bore him.

They approached the iceberg in a long steady glide and the skis were only a few feet from its surface as they levelled off and roared across it.

'I could land there easy,' said Seffin.

'What'd happen if you couldn't get off again? We'd be floating around in these waters for years till it finally melted.'

But what a way to study ice movement, Canaris thought. Find a big enough iceberg and build a camp on it and it would be quite safe for men to spend a couple of years there. They could always be taken off by ship long before there was any danger. That was something else he'd mention back in Washington. Perhaps a big magazine would sponsor an expedition like that.

The aircraft bounced to a halt near the base. 'Thanks for the joyride, Pete, we'll take a longer trip next time.'

Bad weather made them wait eight days before they could set out on the long flight to the Polar Plateau.

This time Seffrin flew steadily south with the boredom of the ice shelf beneath them for the first two hours. No one spoke much, still feeling the tenseness which had preceded the take-off.

The loading of the survival equipment into the aircraft had a grim meaning for all of them. Food, a tent, clothing, fuel and a small sledge and skis were stowed.

Like the crew, Commander Canaris was dressed for survival. Two pairs of thick socks enclosed his feet and his boots were

insulated. He wore long woollen underwear and heavy pants, and in his pack were lighter wind-proof pants that could be pulled on if necessary. His thick singlet and shirt, heavy pull-over and the long insulated jacket which fell almost to his knees and the fur-lined cape that could be domed on to it had all been designed by cold weather experts. If the plane came down and he was uninjured, Canaris could keep warm and alive.

The heat in the aircraft built up and he undid the top of his jacket and relaxed as it droned on towards the mountains on the horizon.

Now and again he listened to the engines, thinking they were missing an occasional beat, but they continued their monotonous throbbing and Canaris began to doze. He wakened when a deeper beat told him they were climbing again. Seffrin was seeking an additional margin of safety as he approached the ice-laden mountains.

The valleys were filled with ice and snow and only the ridges and the tops protruded. Ahead, higher, sharper ridges and peaks stood starkly, stripped of snow by the wind.

Canaris went forward to Seffrin. 'They're high, that's steep country up ahead.'

'Too high for us, over fifteen thousand feet, we detour in a minute,' answered Seffrin as he began sidling around a wind-polished peak and then Canaris saw the great glacier spreading out beneath them as it swept gently out of the mountains.

The ice river looked to be about twenty miles wide and Canaris didn't try to contain his admiration of it.

'It looks like the Mississippi in flood, only it's white,' he said excitedly.

'It does, too.' From the air the crevasses did look like waves, thought Seffrin.

All the hundred and fifty miles up the glacier Canaris hardly looked away from the window. Even when he accepted a mug of coffee he drank only half of it and the rest grew cold.

The engines began to strain when Seffrin climbed higher as they approached the Polar Plateau. They could now see that the glacier poured down from the plateau in three great tongues which joined in steep descent to make the main body of ice.

Again Canaris got the impression it was like a river, this time emptying from a lake between shallow banks. He estimated

that at its head the glacier was about twelve miles wide but it was dwarfed by the plateau expanding south beyond it.

The plateau looked perfectly flat but when Seffrin brought the aircraft down lower Canaris could see the sastrugi, the wind-blown ridges of ice that gave the impression of a ploughed field.

Once again he went forward to Seffrin. 'How far south along the plateau can you get?'

Seffrin was adamant. 'We'll have to get out of here soon, right soon, I don't want to be running out of gas on the way home.'

'How far from here to the Pole?'

'It's about three hundred and ten miles,' replied Seffrin.

'The glacier is certainly the gateway to the Pole, isn't it?'

'Sure is.' Seffrin looked at his instrument panel. 'If you've seen enough, commander, we'll get the hell out of here.'

'O.K.' Reluctantly Canaris went back to his seat. Although he would have liked to have seen more of the Plateau he'd really seen all he'd wanted to.

The glacier descended nearly 10,000 feet on its journey to the ice shelf and once again Canaris tried to commit every feature of it to memory. He ignored the mountains rising on either side and stared at the descending ice, marvelling at its power.

The force was irresistible. Through the ages the glacier had sheered through the rock excavating a bed that was almost as old as creation itself. The ice, Canaris decided, would be three or four thousand feet thick but the total weight of it would be beyond calculation.

The difficult thing to believe was that it moved, but he knew that it did, a few inches a day, an inexorable progress that nothing could stop.

The hours of cramped sitting were making Commander Canaris tired and his head had begun to sag when the cough of an engine startled him. The motor faltered and spluttered before settling once more to its steady reassuring beat.

Hauling himself up out of his seat Canaris pushed up to the cockpit.

Lieutenant Seffrin turned around as soon as he felt the

gloved hand on his shoulder. 'You want a turn at driving, commander?' he asked impishly.

'What was the trouble with that motor just now?'

'That was just a slight case of delay in switching over to the reserve fuel tank,' Seffrin grinned.

'Would you have enough gas for us to call in at the weather station? I'd like to see how Fosbender is getting along.' Canaris didn't mind sounding insistent. If they'd only just started using the reserve tank there should be enough gas.

Lieutenant Seffrin did some calculating. 'Looks like we'll have a tail-wind all the way so it's all right as far as I'm concerned. There's only another ninety miles involved, or thereabouts.'

'Good,' said Canaris, and backed towards his seat. He was curious about Fosbender. It wouldn't take him long to find out if what McCann said was true.

A few minutes after he sat down the aircraft reached the foot of the glacier and was once again over the featureless expanse of the ice shelf. A wing dipped as it banked slightly and then straightened to fly a course bearing away from the silent receding mountains.

This time Canaris slept. He didn't wake until the plane bounced as it touched down a quarter of a mile from the weather station. The first thing he saw was Fosbender waving and then running across the ice to meet them.

Five

THE CRISP, hard covering of snow crunched under Canaris's boots as he walked back to the hut with Fosbender. He had never expected a welcome like it. Fosbender had hugged him warmly after springing at him like an excited schoolboy.

'It's good to see you, commander, it sure is, I never thought you'd just drop in like this.'

Embarrassed, Canaris disengaged himself.

'We were just passing so I thought I'd pay you a quick visit,' he replied gruffly.

Fosbender stopped when they had walked a few yards from the aeroplane. 'What about the crew?' he asked, 'they coming up too?'

'In a minute, there's a ski that's a bit loose. Seffrin wants to make sure it's secure. It'll be kinda bumpy taking off from here.'

Fosbender fell into step with the commander again, walking with long, confident strides. 'You know, one of the peculiar things about this place is that it gives you a different sense of distance. Here we are, a couple of hundred miles from you and now it doesn't seem that far at all.'

Canaris agreed. 'Distance doesn't mean much with aeroplanes, we've been up to the Polar Plateau, if we'd had enough gas we'd have gone to the Pole with no trouble at all.'

'That's what I mean,' said Fosbender. 'If you could use aeroplanes as logistical support you could put a base right at the Pole itself.'

It was a different Fosbender to the one he knew all right, Canaris thought. Fosbender gave him a quick run-down on the base and Canaris couldn't find a fault with any of it. 'You seem to be handling things pretty well out here,' he observed.

'Thank you,' replied Fosbender lightly. Even that impressed Canaris. He put it down to new-found self assurance that the lieutenant could accept a compliment so easily.

At the entrance of the hut Fosbender made the apologies he had overlooked. 'Eddie's down the ice mine and probably didn't hear you come in. I didn't call him, but I will in a minute. Tiny's doing the weather and Bert is making pancakes to mark the occasion. Otherwise they'd have all come down with me. I must confess though, we were going to have pancakes anyway.'

'Don't let that worry you.' Kicking the snow off his boots, Canaris deferred to Fosbender. 'After you.' They stepped inside to the warmth of the hut to be greeted by an aroma of coffee and the freshly-made pancakes.

After the round of handshakes Canaris sat down at the table while Fosbender went to collect Holt from the ice mine, where he was hewing out their only supply of water. The men in the hut were eager for news and they received even the incon-

sequential details Canaris gave them with relish.

'Excuse me,' said Burleson, rushing back to the stove as his pancakes began to burn and setting the boiling coffee pot to one side.

The aircrew led by Seffrin, and Fosbender accompanied by Holt from the ice mine, all arrived together and the round of handshaking began again.

There was a lot of laughing as they all tried to squeeze around the small table. 'Visitors sit, we stand,' ordered Fosbender.

The point was well taken. 'O.K.,' said Canaris, 'but find something to sit on.' Holt went outside and returned with some boxes, which were quickly taken up, but Fosbender stood, a mug of coffee in his hand.

There was a tangle of arms as they all kept reaching for the pancakes, Burleson putting down another stack when the first was finished.

'This was worth coming for,' commented Seffrin. He looked around at Fosbender. 'I knew there was something funny about you guys, no beards, how can you keep warm without a beard?'

'You'd be surprised,' answered Burleson, advancing from the stove with the coffee pot to replenish the empty mugs. 'It's a theory of the boss's and it works too. So do his other ideas.' A heavy frown from Fosbender failed to silence Burleson.

'The lieutenant's decided that if we keep busy time passes more quickly, so he's teaching me navigation, I'm teaching him engineering, Gaskell here runs a met. class, Eddie's in on that too, and he teaches us all card tricks. Since we've got that way we haven't had a minute to spare.'

'I've heard everything now,' said Seffrin. While he was listening his attention had fastened on a small padlocked box, painted red, white and blue, in a corner of the hut.

'What's that box over there, if you don't mind me asking?'

'That's another of the lieutenant's ideas, that's where we keep the snow toads,' Burleson told him wryly.

'The what?' said Canaris showing interest, 'bring it over here.'

Burleson set the box on the table and grinned at Seffrin. 'You haven't heard everything, you know.'

'Trust Burleson to open his big mouth, but seeing you asked,

I'll tell you about the snow toads,' said Fosbender, putting his hand on the box.

'We found out early on that little things keep going wrong here, like the generator running out of fuel or the radio breaking down, you know, commander, the usual run of things, and somebody had to be blamed. So someone was being picked on all the time. Then we invented the snow toads. If anything goes wrong now we blame them. We hunt around and catch them and we lock them in that box. It sounds crazy, but it works.'

Holt looked earnestly at Canaris. 'We caught nine toads in the first fortnight and it's a month now since we've had any trouble.'

Fosbender took the box and put it back in the corner. 'That's right. There's probably a few more about but they're scared to try anything because we'll catch them and lock them up. When we leave here we're going to bury the box right down at the bottom of the ice mine. They'll never get out of there and they know it.'

'It'd be worth while bringing you back to catch our snow toads,' said Canaris. 'We've got a few back there.'

'Any time when we get back and you want snow toads caught, we're just the men for the job,' grinned Fosbender. With that he changed the subject.

A few more minutes passed pleasantly and then Seffrin got to his feet.

'I don't like breaking up the party but I think we ought to be moving. I don't like to trust it unnecessarily.'

'You mean our weather?' asked Fosbender, in mock surprise.

Seffrin never joked about the subject. 'I don't want to get back to the bay and find it's marginal there because I stayed up here too long. I'll only have enough gas left to run a cigarette lighter.'

Canaris pushed his way between them and put a hand on either shoulder. 'Perhaps we could come up and visit you again sometime.' He looked at Seffrin for confirmation.

'Guess we could at that.'

'Now don't you go wasting any gas on our account. We're O.K. and another couple of months will see us through anyway,' Fosbender hastened to assure Canaris.

'We're going to bring you out by air,' Canaris informed him.

'As soon as you're no longer needed up here we'll pick our day and then come up and fly you all out.'

Fosbender didn't mind missing the long tractor journey back over the ice. 'But what about the camp here?' he asked.

'We'll just secure it and close it down. It'll come in useful again with some plans I've got.' Canaris turned to the door. 'Well, if we've got to move, let's go.'

They all trooped out to the aircraft and Canaris took his leave after more handshakes. Seated and strapped in, he looked out of his window at the little group and the hut standing forlornly against the backdrop of mountains. He was glad he was going and not staying.

Seffrin brought the engines to life and when the oil pressure built up he opened the throttles. The aircraft strained but did not budge. The skis were frozen to the ice. The aircraft began to shudder violently as Seffrin increased the power but the ice continued its hold in an unrelenting grip.

Seeing Fosbender gesticulating wildly, Seffrin eased the throttles back. 'What the hell's going on now,' he muttered.

As the engines faded back to little more than idling, Fosbender rushed forward and disappeared under a wing.

He emerged a moment later and waved a clenched fist to the pilot.

'I caught a toad, have a go now,' he shouted. Then he covered his clenched hand with the other, as if to prevent what was inside escaping.

'Holy cow,' said Seffrin in annoyance, and opened the throttles again. This time the aircraft slid forward and gathered speed, the tail came up and soon they were climbing and heading homewards.

Canaris screwed around in his seat for a last glimpse of Fosbender and his men still waving. Impulsively he waved himself. For him it had been quite a day. He had flown over the vast plateau which gave birth to the rivers of ice and he could still see it vividly in his mind's eye.

The encounter with Fosbender, however, had also produced its own sense of wonder. The transformation was almost unbelievable. A callow young officer he hadn't liked had turned into a man.

Canaris wondered if he could accept the credit for that by

having the intuition to give Fosbender his command, but his conscience told him better. Although he'd sent Fosbender out to establish the weather station he'd had nothing to do with what happened after that. No one could take that achievement away from where it belonged.

'There are three things that make life worth living, warmth, food and winning at cards,' said Commander Canaris. He pushed the empty coffee cup away and sat back, relaxed.

Lieutenant Fabro picked up the cards and shuffled them idly. 'Sure you wouldn't like another game? Professionally, I'd prescribe one.'

Canaris chuckled and shook his head. 'No, Doc, Seffrin here and I have beaten you and Enright three games to two and we're holding on to the honour. Aren't we?' The pilot nodded in agreement.

'We didn't get the cards,' complained Enright. 'You've got to get the right cards to win.'

'C'mon now,' chided Canaris, enjoying his victory, 'you were up against superior players.'

'We'll come again.' Lieutenant Fabro put the cards down and listened to the rising wind. 'I don't like the sound of that much.'

The wind was gusting and buffeting the hut and outside straining wires were singing a high-pitched song.

'You can get used to anything but you never get used to the wind. It's what stops this place from being a pleasure resort,' observed Enright.

'Bed,' said Canaris with finality. An hour later he was still lying wide awake on his bunk, listening to the wind. He didn't like the sound of it at all. In the morning he would have another check made to see that everything was tied down tightly.

When he woke the wind was even stronger, steadily increasing in pressure and trying to remove every obstacle in its path.

Snow drifts piled up against the buildings and smothered the drums of fuel and the equipment which was out in the open. The wind gauge at midday recorded 90 knots and was still rising. The thermometers recorded thirty below zero and were still falling.

There was one good thing about the storm so far as Com-

mander Canaris was concerned, it would make everyone realise that the ice was hostile country. They hadn't had a good taste of it before.

The wind increased in force until its monstrous shrieking dominated everything and it began to affect every man. At first they made jokes about it but soon no one laughed. All they could do was listen to the wind and wonder if it would ever stop. They could sense its limitless power and they became afraid.

Only Canaris carried on as if nothing were happening.

The quiet sombre men amused him, and he said so to Enright. 'Apart from the wind it's so quiet around here it's like the death of Little Nell.'

'I don't mind telling you the wind's getting on my nerves,' said Enright. 'It could drive a man out of his mind. However, that's not what I came to see you about. We're having trouble getting through to Fosbender. The reception has been too bad in the last hour to read them.'

'That's only to be expected, but stay with them because it can be variable in these conditions.' Canaris was unperturbed. 'You'll have them one minute and lose them the next.'

'I wonder if they are getting a blow like this?' asked Enright.

'They'll be getting it all right.' Canaris was quite sure about that.

Contact was regained briefly at four o'clock in the afternoon. A worried voice was heard through the hissing and crackling. All the operator could make out was that Fosbender was ill and in severe pain, but that was all. The operator thought that the voice was Gaskell's, but it faded again before he could identify it.

As soon as he heard the news Canaris sent for Lieutenant Fabro. 'What do you make of it?' he asked.

The doctor admitted he couldn't help. 'There's just not enough information to make a diagnosis. It could be just something he ate.'

'That's what I think too, everything sounds worse when you get conditions like this. There's no need to panic yet,' the commander said soothingly. But he felt a creeping doubt he couldn't rationalise as he left the radio room, leaving orders that he was to be called immediately reception improved.

'What do you think?' Lieutenant Enright asked him later.

'I don't think,' Canaris snapped at him. 'Only fools think, I've got to have facts. If I were to act every time I thought something had happened or was going to happen, I'd be an idiot. We've got to deal with facts; we don't want any damn fool theorising.'

Enright buttoned his lip as he had had to do so often before but the rebuff had stung him and it showed, his lips compressed into a thin line, the starting point of a flush which began to spread over his face.

Canaris tried to make amends. 'We've got enough to worry about at present, right here, that's what I'm trying to say. It's no good worrying about something hoping it won't happen. Anyway, you've got some real worries here, what about the radio mast?'

'Yes,' said Enright, 'we've got to get one of those main stays tightened, otherwise it'll come down.'

'Now that's something we can stop happening. You do something about that,' Canaris answered.

The wind almost took Enright off his feet until he crouched low and forced his way towards the mast, one step at a time. He had never imagined the wind could be so strong, and shriek and howl with such intensity. It had stripped the ice clean of all movable objects and now seemed to be concentrating on the buildings and the men out in it.

His head buried in an arm to shield his face, Enright wearily fought his way over to the radio mast and joined the small group working there.

He stood right alongside McCann before shouting, 'How's it going?'

McCann turned away from the wind to answer. 'We held it with a tractor until we got another wire rigged and all we've got to do now is tighten the shackle. Lucky we noticed it when we did though. She'd have come down otherwise.'

There was nothing he could do but Enright felt obliged to stay out with the men until the job was done. The wind and freezing cold steadily drained away his body warmth. For the first time he realised how easy it would be to die.

Leaning on the new guy wire, Enright tested it with his weight. The wind caught him when his feet were off the ground

and threw him heavily on to his back.

McCann got him to his feet. 'She'll hold till Kingdom come, let's beat it inside,' he cried.

Enright allowed himself to be led back, his head reeling. Inside the building McCann was still heaving from exertion as he took his heavy clothing off. 'I learned something out there.'

'What's that?' asked Enright, rapidly returning to normal.

'The Antarctic weather's a bastard.' McCann turned his right hand around for the lieutenant to see. The palm was bright red where the skin had been stripped away. It looked as if it had been sandpapered raw.

'Let me look at that.' Enright took the injured hand and inspected it.

'Easy, lieutenant,' McCann protested, 'it's stinging like hell now it's warming up again.'

'How'd you do that?'

The explanation was so simple. When they had first begun to tighten the new guy wire McCann had slipped forward and collided head-on with another man, hurting his eye on the stiff bristles of the other's fur hood. He had taken off his glove and briefly rubbed his eye with his bare fingers and then, without thinking, had reached down and picked up the wrench from the ice. It stuck to his bare warm flesh like a limpet. There was nothing for him to do but suffer the agony of ripping it away, his flesh with it.

'We'll get the Doc to look at this right away,' said Enright briskly, 'I'll go find him.' Eventually he ran him down in the radio room but everyone, including Commander Canaris, shushed him to silence. They were grouped around the loudspeaker, straining to make sense of the voice that rose and fell, as if it was borne on the wind that raged outside.

'I can't make head nor tail of that.' Commander Canaris had walked to the far side of the room in the hope that that would lessen the distortion. The look on the faces of the others showed that they agreed. Lieutenant Fabro pulled his chair up close to the table and spoke as deliberately as he could into the microphone.

'Put your right thumb on his navel and your little finger on his hip bone, then press down firmly with your middle finger.

You get that?' He repeated the instructions four times and then sat back to wait.

Enright tried to attract the doctor's attention again, but Fabro was concentrating on the microphone.

'Did you read me, did you read me?' he suddenly asked.

The voice of Gaskell responded clearly. 'That hurts him bad, Doc, that hurt him real bad. He couldn't bear for me to push down very far.'

'You feel any swelling, any tenderness?'

'What's that?' queried Gaskell, his voice fading.

'Where you felt, where you felt, was it tender, was there any swelling?'

'Where you said I pushed and he couldn't bear it.' Once more the static obliterated everything.

Lieutenant Fabro turned around to Commander Canaris, 'I'd say, just on the strength of that, he's got acute appendicitis.'

'What's the treatment?' Canaris enquired.

'A relatively simple operation, I'd just take his appendix out. I'd say I should get up there as soon as I could, and if possible, bring him back here and operate. If he was in no condition to shift, I'd operate on him there.'

Canaris turned the problem over in his mind, conscious that everyone was waiting for him to answer. 'We'd have to fly there and we mightn't be able to do that for days. How about that?'

Fabro answered in his precise professional voice. 'At best, if it is what I think it is, he could recover quite naturally. That does happen; but at worst it could develop into peritonitis, or an abscess could form and burst. That would be fatal. Without treatment, appendicitis is a very common cause of death.'

'O.K.,' said Canaris decisively, 'we know what we're doing now. Go and get Lieutenant Seffrin over here,' he ordered Enright. 'We'll fly up there just as soon as the weather breaks.'

Relief that something positive was happening filled the room and there was a burst of excited conversation. Canaris wanted no part of it and left without another word.

He might have said something, thought Fabro.

Then he remembered Enright. 'What was it you wanted?' he asked.

Enright was lost in his own thoughts. 'Oh yes,' he said,

coming back to earth, 'could you come and have a look at McCann. He picked up a wrench and he's torn the flesh off his hand. It looks a bit of a mess.'

'It's going to be one of those days,' said Fabro.

'It's going to be one of those weeks. I wouldn't like to be Fosbender, sick up there, with this rough stuff we're getting now,' Enright replied. 'God knows when we'll be able to get to him.'

Lying on his bunk with his eyes closed, listening to the wind, Commander Canaris realised that things were going wrong. He'd had too much luck, everything had worked too well and now he was going to suffer for it. There was no rhyme or reason to that, but he'd seen it happen far too often before. If he were to be brutally honest with himself he should already have given Fosbender up.

That, however, was out of the question. The men would expect him to try anything to save Fosbender.

A strong thread of excitement ran through the whole base from the time Canaris got up the next day. Once he realised that the wind had gone down he went into action, moving about quickly, and attending to most of the details of the rescue operation himself.

'I'll never understand him,' Lieutenant Enright told the pilots as they checked over the aircraft. 'He was in a mood as black as hell last night and he wakes up this morning as fresh as a daisy and rarin' to go. At one stage last night it wouldn't even have surprised me if he'd have been prepared to let Fosbender take his chance, but there's none of that this morning.'

'I guess we all take a bit of understanding at times, but I'll admit he's right on it today, he's been over here twice already, as keen as mustard,' said Seffrin. 'I've got to do the worrying now, I've got to fly this thing there and I want to see that wind go down a lot yet.'

The base looked even more desolate after the storm. Fresh snow was piled against the buildings and the gear stored outside, but without the sun it did not glisten and was a dirty grey. A mattress of clouds of the same colour stretched from horizon to horizon although far to the north there was a thin line of blue sky.

'I'd be happier if the sun was shining,' Seffrin added. 'May-

be then there'd be a chance that the weather would settle and hold for a few days. We might get a break here but I suppose you know that up at Fosbender's camp it's still blowing a gale?'

'It will clear up there, don't worry,' Enright assured him.

'It'll need to. I can get off here all right but getting down there's a different matter. A pilot's blind when the wind whips the snow up and there's no horizon.'

'I've heard that happens,' said Enright gravely.

'If we can see the ground we'll land, but if we can't . . .' Seffrin shrugged his shoulders.

'You'll see it.' Enright was so positive. 'Canaris will see to that. Once he's made up his mind to land, nothing is going to stop him. You know he could come out of this pretty well.'

'How come?' Seffrin asked.

'Well, he's done all right for a young commander so far and now he's really got something. Hasn't it occurred to you that an aerial rescue of anyone has never been made on the ice before?'

'I don't suppose one has,' Seffrin replied thoughtfully. 'Perhaps in Alaska but not down here.'

'That's what I'm trying to tell you,' Enright continued. 'It won't do the commander any harm back in Washington if this comes off.'

'Give him his due, he's not so vainglorious he's rigged the whole thing just for his benefit,' Seffrin protested.

Six

THE PLANE left at three o'clock in the morning after hours of speculation and discussion during the night in which no one had gone to bed. The weather at the base cleared quickly, as if the grey veil which hung over it had suddenly been drawn aside, and for the first time in a week the long slanting rays of the polar sun brought hope to all.

The roar of the aeroplane's engines echoed forlornly across the ice to the watching men, as it began its take-off run. They

watched and waved until it was only a black speck, still climbing. Suddenly it was gone altogether.

Commander Canaris sat saying nothing, wondering what the pilots were thinking now that they were committed and on the way. After an hour Lieutenant Seffrin's beckoning arm appeared through the doorway into the small cabin.

Canaris knew instinctively what he was going to see.

He squeezed through the doorway and, with his chin almost resting on Seffrin's shoulder, looked ahead through the narrow window. They were flying towards a bank of white which was drifting seawards, in front of which were patches of broken and ragged wind-shaped clouds.

Seffrin screwed around to look out of the side window. There the cloud lost its whiteness and was a gutter grey, mile upon mile of threshing, tormented energy that was writhing itself into some of the most evil shapes that the commander had ever seen.

'We can get over some of it but we'll have to ride through the rest. You'd better go back and batten down. It's going to be a rough ride,' Seffrin instructed.

Canaris didn't move. 'How far is this going to extend?' he asked.

'How do I know,' replied Seffrin. 'Thirty miles, a hundred, I don't know. All I know is what you know, that the weather station is bound to be down in the middle of it.'

'You must have something figured out or you wouldn't be headed right into this.'

'Yes,' Seffrin shouted. 'There's just a chance we'll find a break and can nip down through it. Otherwise . . . ' He shrugged.

Canaris was about to reply when the plane lurched sideways and he was thrown hard against the door frame. An ache started in his rib cage as he dragged himself erect again.

'You go and sit down, it'll get worse,' said Seffrin impassively.

'How long till we get overhead?' Canaris demanded. 'He was being tossed backwards and forwards and had to hold on to Seffrin's seat with both hands.

'Perhaps twenty minutes, it depends on how strong the wind gets. I'll let you know.'

Canaris knew Seffrin was too busy for any more questions and he edged himself around and began to make his way slowly back towards his seat. He was almost to it when he was thrown to the cabin floor. A surge of pain ran through his body and his left knee ached dully.

Lieutenant Fabro reached out sympathetically towards him but the tight seat straps prevented him from helping. As Canaris lay prone the plane dropped again and this time his seat rushed to meet him. He grabbed the arm-rest and held on desperately. The next time the plane lurched he was flung back into the seat.

'Get those straps done up,' Fabro called anxiously. With an effort Canaris secured them, straining until they held him tight.

The engines seemed to be faltering but his experienced ear told him that it was only the wind, and that for seconds at a time all their roar was being sucked out into the void.

From time to time he glanced at the doctor and Enright. Fabro was sitting with his eyes closed, gripping his seat with both hands, his body tensed against the incessant buffeting.

Enright's eyes were wide open and the straining muscles on his face showed his fear and the effort he was making to keep control of himself.

Canaris didn't blame him for being scared. Not being a pilot Enright wouldn't know anything about storms. All he had to do was sit there and ride it out.

Canaris knew they were really high and he decided to tell Enright what was happening – that Seffrin was trying to get above the storm. First he had to loosen his seat belt so he could lean closer. His fingers began to adjust the straps when there was a rattle like machine-gun fire on the fuselage.

'What's that?' Enright shouted in alarm.

'It's just ice being thrown off the propellers, it happens often,' Canaris shouted back. He freed himself from the seat belt and edged his way carefully to Enright's seat.

'Don't worry about a bit of ice coming off, when it doesn't come off is the time to start fretting.'

Enright looked unbelieving but did not reply. He was growing tired of holding his stomach muscles rigid but if he relaxed them the nauseating sickness welling up inside him was almost too much. He didn't think he could hold on much longer.

With an effort Canaris hauled himself to Fabro's seat. 'You O.K. Doc?'

Fabro smiled wryly at him. 'I'm enjoying it, only thing that worries me is, are we getting anywhere?'

'Seffrin's hoping to find a break in it soon, we could even be over the worst of it now.' Canaris straightened up and took a tentative step back towards his seat. At that same instant the aircraft banked sharply and plunged downwards.

He grabbed desperately at a seat but nothing stayed still and he was picked up and flung into the cockpit. He felt himself gradually descending into a roaring blackness. It seemed pointless then to try and hold on and he let himself sink.

When he regained consciousness he was still lying where he had fallen but the aircraft was flying straight and level.

'Don't move yet, in case you've broken something.' The voice seemed so distant but he knew it was Fabro's. He was lying at the pilot's feet, how he got there he couldn't remember.

'Can you move your legs?' asked Fabro.

Slowly Canaris bent his knees and then straightened them again. Painfully he moved his shoulders and then tried to sit upright.

'Just stay where you are for a minute, let me look at your eye,' Fabro ordered.

Instinctively Canaris put his hand to his face but Fabro reached out and drew it away. 'Let me look at it.'

The white bone above Canaris's right eyebrow gleamed dully where it was exposed inside the rapidly swelling purple flesh surrounding it.

'Bloody nasty, but you'll live,' said Fabro genially. 'I'll help you, see if you can get up now, I want to get you back to your seat.'

Canaris reached out for the pilot's seat and pulled himself into a sitting position. Immediately a pain started through his head, growing quickly and almost blinding him with its intensity.

At last, by willpower, he beat it back and got on to his feet. A helping hand from Fabro steadied him. If it was the last thing he did, Canaris was going to walk back to his seat.

'What the hell were you doing, wandering around like that?' asked Seffrin as he began to move away. The extreme annoy-

ance showed on the pilot's face and he was unable to hold his tongue any longer.

'I was coming up to see you. I wanted to know what was happening,' Canaris replied.

'Ice,' said Seffrin, 'there was too much ice to stay in there any longer, I had to get the hell out of it, and fast. You should have known that.'

Canaris, his strength building up, loosened himself from Fabro's grip and peered through a window. They were flying through broken cloud and about three thousand feet below he could see the ice with a horizon of low hills in the distance.

'The Desert of Dreams,' Seffrin remarked laconically. There were furrows on the windswept ice and the brittle snow was moving over them like sand in a storm.

Canaris edged back towards Seffrin. 'What do you think? We give it another go?'

Seffrin didn't want to make any decision.

'We could try going in just above the deck,' he answered guardedly, 'as a last resort.'

'Back to your seat,' said Fabro determinedly, 'it's lunacy to talk about trying to fly in there.'

Canaris was growing weak again and he had to steel himself to stand.

'It's been done before, we've done that sort of flying,' he protested.

The pain was beginning to take over again and he was having to make a conscious effort to think.

Then it occurred to him that the decision wasn't his at all. Seffrin was the pilot, he was in command. Whether they tried to go on or turned back depended on him.

'It's for you to say if we try again,' said Canaris. He thought he was going to faint and it took all the strength he had to stop his knees buckling.

'I fly this aeroplane where I'm told. You have the say where.' Seffrin rapped the words out, half turning around in his seat while he did. He glimpsed the ugly wound which was swelling and had now closed Canaris's eye. Ashamed, he turned to the front again but he did not change his mind.

The pain was swaying Canaris, rocking him gently in its embrace. Around his wound the skin was tightening and it felt

as if his whole face was being stretched.

The more he tried to reason with himself or to answer Seffrin, the more his pain increased. He was still trying to decide when he began to slip downwards, but this time Fabro's strong arm shot out and supported him.

Seffrin kept looking straight ahead in an attitude which indicated he was still waiting for Canaris's decision. In all honesty, he told himself, he would try to go in low but he was not going to make the decision. He erased all thoughts of Fosbender from his mind and concentrated on his controls.

Canaris was thinking about Fosbender. Just lying there, he thought, just waiting.

When he came to a clearing in his forest of pain he made his decision. He could not risk them all, he just could not do that.

'We'll go home,' he said to Seffrin, 'we'll go home now,' and backed towards his seat. He felt himself falling again, but this time he did not care. There was nothing to care about.

Lieutenant Fabro was standing at his bedside in the sick bay when he woke. 'Take it easy,' said the doctor, when Canaris started to use his elbows to work himself up higher on the pillow, 'just you lie back awhile.'

Canaris collapsed. The brief effort had taken all the strength out of him and he felt sick. The doctor put a professional hand on his wrist and then felt his pulse.

'You'll live,' he said cheerfully.

'Someone said that to me before,' Canaris answered weakly.

'There's nothing the matter with you except a fractured skull and a bruised spleen. How you stayed on your feet as long as you did, I'll never know. You were back on to me all the time you were standing in the cockpit, I never realised you were hurt that bad,' he added apologetically.

There was no movement or acknowledgement from Commander Canaris. He lay with his eyes closed while the doctor stood patiently by the bedside.

Canaris kept his eyes closed when he eventually spoke. 'You can tell me, what about Fosbender?' His voice was flat and matter of fact, as if it was a matter of no great importance.

Fabro, still holding Canaris's wrist and feeling the quickening pulse, knew better. He laid the arm down on the bed. 'We don't want to go into all that now. Get some rest, you need it.'

'Tell me now.' The body was injured but the will of Canaris was as strong as ever.

Fabro hesitated and when he looked down at the bed he was held by two compelling blue eyes that stared without blinking. 'Should I get Enright in also?' he asked.

Commander Canaris said nothing but kept staring. The doctor realised that he had prepared himself for a shock. It was best to tell him.

'Fosbender died,' he said softly.

'I see.' Canaris closed his eyes again. 'When?'

'There was nothing that any of us could do about it, he died while we were still in the air, before we turned back. Even if we had got there it would have been too late.'

He glanced anxiously at his patient to see how he was taking it. There was no change in the commander that a cursory inspection could detect. The lack of feeling made the doctor angry. You iron-willed bastard, he thought, you'd rather die than show any emotion.

'Tell me the rest,' Canaris ordered.

'There's really not that much to tell, except that with Fosbender already dead while we were in the storm we were risking a lot for nothing. We were flying out to help a dead man.'

'You doctors become very cynical about dead men,' Canaris answered bitterly. 'Perhaps it is because you see so many of them.'

Lieutenant Fabro flushed, but Canaris did not pursue the matter any further. The effort of concentrating had weakened him and with a long sigh he sank lower in his bed.

With professional authority Fabro placed Canaris's exposed arm inside the blankets and pulled them up around his shoulders. 'You get some more sleep. Your strength will come back quicker then.'

'Send Enright in here,' Canaris ordered.

'I don't think you should see anyone else for a time.'

'Send him in.' The growl made Fabro back off towards the door where he hesitated, debating whether to obey or not.

Canaris turned his head on the pillow so that he stared directly at him. His eyes had lost their concentration and were glazing with exhaustion.

Fabro knew better than to arouse Canaris so he decided to fetch Enright.

'You must only see him for a couple of minutes. If you don't go back to sleep again soon I'll give you something that will make you.'

The brief flicker acknowledged Canaris's assent.

Enright came into the room quietly, observing all the cautions the doctor had given him.

'How are you, sir?' he asked.

With an effort, Canaris disposed of the pleasantries with a slight movement of his head under the turban of bandages.

'How long have I been here?'

'About nine hours,' said Enright, sitting down on the edge of the bed. 'You've been unconscious since you fell in the aeroplane.'

'Fosbender, too bad about that boy.'

'Yes,' said Enright, 'they told us he said something that they couldn't understand, just before he died.'

'I know what he'd be saying.' Canaris's lips moved with the suggestion of a smile. 'He'd be saying that there are just too many snow toads out there.'

Enright knew exactly what Canaris was thinking. 'There's always snow toads on the ice,' he answered.

'They travel in aeroplanes too,' Canaris observed.

For a minute or two he said nothing and Enright thought that he had gone to sleep. As he prepared to leave the room and rose up from the bed, Canaris questioned him again.

'They've buried him?'

They had, said Enright. He was certain now this was what Canaris had called him in to ask about.

'Tell me how they did it.'

'They left him in his sleeping bag and they took him out about half a mile from the hut and they covered him with snow. One of them made a cross out of a broken ski and they marked the place with that.'

'Like Captain Scott,' said Canaris, 'under a shroud of snow and moving gradually out to sea. We'll all be gone long before he gets there.'

Canaris made a final effort. 'They did what was right, to bury him out on the ice.' His voice was weaker and he lay like a

corpse himself, not even hearing Enright leave.

Commander Canaris was given a salute of spoons the first time he appeared in the mess a fortnight later. It was an old tradition that anyone who had achieved something noteworthy should be so saluted and honoured.

Canaris stood unsmiling until the banging had ceased. It was plain that the welcome had embarrassed him.

He steadied himself with one hand on the table. 'Thank you, thank you all,' he said and sat down. Everyone waited for him to speak again but he ignored them and started to eat as if they weren't there.

Gradually the conversation around the table picked up, leaving Canaris on an island of his own thoughts at the head of it.

He longed to talk with someone about the flight and Fosbender's death but he could not. There must be misgivings and doubts, he thought, and a round-table talk like they used to have would put an end to them. Everything would start off again where they'd left off. Canaris, however, couldn't bring himself to raise the subject, even though he knew his men never would. He suffered alone.

After a week of withdrawal, during which time he was hardly seen, he felt himself again.

His determination rising he decided to take firm hold of his men once again.

'Things have got too slack around here,' he growled to Enright one morning, 'it's time they were straightened up.'

'Not that I had noticed.' His days of command had given Enright a new confidence.

'You wouldn't,' Canaris answered cruelly. He began to detail a list of orders so rapidly Enright couldn't remember them all. But he knew that the effect was going to be work until they dropped.

'We'll be readied up for winter at the end of December at this rate,' Enright protested. 'A lot of these jobs needn't be started until February.'

'That's the way I want it done,' said Canaris dogmatically, 'we want a good, tight outfit here once again, that's what we want.'

Half of the west wall of the cubby-hole that served as his

office was covered by a map. Canaris reached out towards it and drew a line with his finger.

'See that?' The edge of his fingernail had traced a thin line from the base across the Desert of Dreams to the weather station.

'I'm going to keep that station open through the winter.'

Enright looked at him in amazement. 'They're not prepared for that.'

'They will be. We'll resupply them in February and we'll do so again during the winter.'

'In the winter; make an overland journey that far in winter?' Enright wondered if he'd heard right. If he had, Canaris was going mad.

'You can't send men out on a trip like that in winter. No one ever travels overland on the ice in winter.'

'Well they should. We're not going to be shut down here like blind moles just because it's winter and it's dark. We've got to learn to move around in winter.

'I can use a cigarette. How about you?' Canaris pushed the pack across the table to Enright and then took one himself. It was his way of unbending.

'Here,' he said, rasping a flame from his lighter while Enright felt for a match. The flame was as steady as the hand that held the lighter.

He's back to normal, Enright thought, he's cured, nothing will shift him. He realised it was a sign of strength, not weakness, that Canaris was letting him argue.

'You just can't compare forty years ago with now. We're better equipped, better fed, better everything. We can do anything we want to do, if we put our minds to it.' Canaris tapped his cigarette and a dusting of ash fell on to the floor.

'We want to give our men a sense of adventure and I'm not being funny when I say that, but if we go home after doing things that haven't been done before, or doing them better than they've been done before, then we've done something. If we just sit around and do what's expected of us then we really haven't done anything. Know what I mean?'

'In a way, but don't try to make heroes of us all, I'm not one anyway,' Enright ended lamely.

'What I was saying before. We'll get this whole place

tightened up and we'll do things.' Canaris was speaking enthusiastically now.

'This outfit's not here temporarily, there just isn't anywhere else left on earth to explore and develop like this.'

'Is that why you came in the first place?' Enright asked quietly.

'It was one of the reasons. If you want to get on in any job you've got to have a certain amount of instinct for knowing where the opportunities are before they happen. I guess you could say that I felt that they would happen here.'

'You're often a hard man to understand, commander,' said Enright. 'I bet there's not one man out there who really understands you all that well. If you explained things before you gave the orders, especially in a place like this where we're on our own, most people would see it different.'

'We can't run around explaining ourselves all the time, just accept that one half of the world gives orders and the other half takes them,' said Canaris, sagely.

'O.K.,' said Enright, who had decided to offer no more opposition. 'You want me for anything more just now? I'd better just see how things are getting on out there.'

A casual wave of Canaris's hand said all that there was to say, and Enright went about his other business.

The commander remained seated at his desk smoking thoughtfully. It was peculiar how a man lost touch when he went on leave, or even worse, was ill. He seemed to remain stationary whilst everything else went on.

The past fortnight was lost ground but he'd make it up or at least get it back.

Impulsively Canaris put his feet up on the edge of the table and drew his knees up under his chin, his thoughts racing away over the months that lay ahead.

He was still sitting like that when Enright burst in. 'There's a ship in the bay,' he shouted.

'There's what?'

'There's a ship in the bay, five or six miles off but she's coming in. How come we didn't know she was coming?' Enright was wildly excited. He'd run a hundred yards with the news.

'Hold on now,' said Canaris calmly, 'no need to get excited

just because we've got visitors. We'll just take a little trip down to the bay and see who's here.'

They rode down to the ice edge on McCann's tractor and Canaris focussed his binoculars on the ship ploughing steadily through the still black water.

'It's the *Oswega*,' he exclaimed. 'Here, you have a look.' Enright fumbled with the glasses. 'By God, it is too.' He passed them to McCann who stared steadily before giving his verdict. 'No doubt about it.'

Men streamed down steadily from the base and they gathered alongside Canaris and watched the ship come in.

'Now what would a ship that dropped us off four months ago be doing here when it's not due back till next spring?' MacCann wondered out aloud for them all.

Canaris was the first to find out. As soon as the ship was secured he went aboard. 'Well fancy seeing you,' said Captain Lanteigne impishly, as he shook his hand.

In his cabin he told Canaris bluntly what he had been ordered to do, pick him up and all his men and take them home.

The news staggered Canaris and he found it hard to believe, even after he had read the written orders.

'There wasn't even a hint of this,' he complained, 'not one single radio message even hinted at it.'

'You don't seem to understand, there's a war on: you knew about Pearl Harbour?'

Captain Lanteigne listened stoically while Canaris raged and protested as he stalked around the cabin. He let him go on without interruption when he realised the man really did feel disappointed and frustrated that the war should reach out and involve him.

Canaris genuinely believed that he was too distant, in his own cold world, to be a part of it.

The torrent ceased and Canaris sat down. 'Don't tell me,' he said, 'I'm making a fool of myself, aren't I?'

'I wouldn't say that,' said Captain Lanteigne, 'anyone who's been here would know how you feel.'

'But why all the secrecy?' Canaris protested. 'Why didn't they let me know as soon as they decided?'

'You're lucky they even remembered about you,' answered

the captain, 'they might have forgotten about you till the end of the war.'

'A pity they hadn't.'

Lanteigne continued. 'You had to be brought out. You couldn't be supplied here in wartime and anyway you've no place here while there's a war on.'

'O.K.,' said Canaris vehemently, 'O.K., but not to take any gear, just leave it all here, I just can't believe that.'

'That's the order,' said Captain Lanteigne, 'nothing goes back on the ship, only the men. It'll come in useful again.'

'After the war,' Canaris answered sarcastically, 'whenever that might be.'

'Will two days be enough to close it down? It's not much time I know but . . .'

'I've got to get the men out of the weather station. If the weather is good up there we'll fly them out tonight, otherwise you'll just have to wait until it is,' Canaris answered dogmatically.

The men already knew they were going home when he returned to the ice, and grimly rode back to the base on the tractors with them.

By their attitude Canaris knew that not one of them really wanted to go, not yet, not until they'd been through the long night, among other things, but the prospect of war excited them. It was if they had just heard about it for the first time.

PART TWO

Seven

THE sudden change in pitch of the engines woke the admiral and he looked out of the window to see the long line of the Southern Alps standing on the horizon, their white peaks shining starkly in the moonlight. Beneath were the sprawling Canterbury Plains, their small towns marked by rows of naked street lights slipping past as Major Heapy held his aircraft in a long steady descent to Christchurch airport. The bright blue lights marking the main streets of the city began to appear, bending around the dark mass of Hagley Park, and the admiral wondered where the quiet street on the edge of it was, where he had made his home for the last two years.

As he smartened himself up and put on his shoes he felt the aircraft rolling slightly as the pilot steadied it over the final mile of its approach. Suddenly there was a thump and a brief shriek as the tyres gripped the asphalt. The runway lights whipped past and for the last time the engines roared as the propellers were put in reverse thrust and the throttles opened. Finally the aircraft stopped briefly and turned off the runway riding steadily back towards the terminal buildings where a small group of men was waiting.

The admiral ignored the rising chatter and the activity around him. He was thinking of his wife, Gwen, and their home which was only three miles away. He had brought her, with their two girls, to Christchurch two years ago when he had taken command of the task force. When it was time for him to go back to Washington in March, the end of the season, she had suggested staying on and he reluctantly agreed it was the right thing to do. It was better not to interrupt the children's education and anyway he would be back in September again when the summer season began and the flying to the Antarctic resumed.

'Leaving a young wife like you behind for six months is just asking for trouble,' he grumbled to her mockingly.

'Don't be so silly, Peter,' she had answered, leaning over the back of the sofa and softly kissing him on the neck. 'I'm not so young, I'm thirty-six, remember?'

'And I'm fifty, which is a very bad age for a man to be away from his wife for long, especially a cheeky little redhead like you.'

He had known at the outset that he would have to agree with her and he could see the logic in her argument. Why interrupt the children's schooling when it wasn't really necessary? They had complained before that just when they made friends they were taken away.

Commander Sciple handed the admiral his hat. 'The briefing you wanted is set up and they're assembled over at headquarters already, except for Commander Spengler, who is going to meet you here and take you over in his car.'

'Heapy made good time,' said the admiral looking at his watch, 'it's only 2.30. Let's get going,' he added as the first, tentative pressure went on the brakes and the aircraft began to stop.

As soon as the doors were opened the admiral stepped out and took the outstretched hand of Commander Spengler, drawing him to him and slapping his back.

'Good of you to meet me, John,' he said heartily and allowed himself to be led away to the waiting car.

Good, all right, thought Commander Sciple, as he followed along and climbed into the front seat with the driver. You'd have made things tough for the poor bastard if he hadn't shown up.

The car purred off the tarmac to cover the mile of wet streets to the headquarters. Admiral Canaris leaned over the front seat and tapped Sciple on the shoulder. 'You know John of course?'

Turning around unenthusiastically, Sciple took Commander Spengler's hand and gave it a brief squeeze. Momentarily Spengler returned the pressure and then he withdrew and turned back to the admiral. There wasn't very much he liked about Sciple and his small dark eyes showed it. But he did not make the mistake of forgetting that Sciple was the admiral's man. As such he could be formidable opposition to anyone if he wanted to.

The sentry outside the headquarters snapped to attention as the admiral and the two officers went in and marched straight down the long corridor to the map room at the end of it where the conference was to be held.

Fatigued by the long flight, Sciple had to make a conscious effort to keep up and he marvelled at the admiral swinging along effortlessly with no semblance of tiredness about him. He looked as if he had just made a nine hundred mile flight, not one of nearly nine thousand non-stop. As a short man, Sciple envied the admiral's tall frame and wide shoulders. Right now he appeared to be taller and wider than ever.

The introductions to the waiting officers were perfunctory and Admiral Canaris seated himself and got down to business. He wanted a detailed account from each of his men of what progress had been made.

The good news came first. 'We got all the co-operation we asked for,' said Captain Dowd, the naval attaché at the Wellington Embassy. 'There's no trouble dealing with the New Zealand Government. We just explained to them that we had to have a picket ship to report weather between here and McMurdo Sound and they're sending a frigate, but it's going to take it another two days to get in position.'

'Why that long?' asked the admiral impatiently.

'As you know, sir, they haven't got much of a Navy here and it so happened that the only frigate available was at Auckland at the other end of the country and it has to steam a couple of thousand miles.'

'That figures,' the admiral nodded, and was turning towards Captain Hershberger, the meteorologist, when Captain Dowd coughed gently to catch his attention before continuing. 'They were also held up while they got hold of an Army helicopter to put on the frigate, as it's not equipped with one. If it did so happen they had to do search and rescue as well as weather, the helicopter would be needed.'

'I don't think there will be any need for a helicopter but a good move just the same,' the admiral commented.

Commander Sciple felt the cigarette butt burning his fingers but he didn't move or take his eyes off the admiral. 'You don't think there'll be any need for a helicopter,' he thought, 'who

do you think you are, God? What will you do if we do go down, walk on water till the picket ship gets there?'

Lost in reflection, Sciple ground his cigarette out as Captain Dowd spread out the weather map and traced its pattern with his pencil.

'There's a fifteen hundred mile blank south of Campbell Island, of course,' he reported, 'and we'll be able to clear most of that up when the frigate takes up its picket station, but going on what's come in from McMurdo, it is not very promising at the moment.'

'At McMurdo or on the way?' the admiral wanted to know.

'At McMurdo principally, but the pattern does suggest bad headwinds going south.'

'Headwinds wouldn't stop us.' They all noticed the determined way the admiral spoke.

'No,' said Captain Dowd, without sounding convinced, 'but there will have to be much better weather at McMurdo before there is a chance of landing there in the dark.'

'And now, let's hear from you, John,' said Admiral Canaris, turning to Commander Spengler. 'How are they getting on with the McMurdo preparations?'

'Making a runway out on that bay ice in the dark isn't going to be easy, admiral, and according to the report we got from there last night the storm they are having will have to lift before they can do much more.'

The admiral looked testy as he leaned forward, his interlocked fingers supporting his chin. 'I knew it wouldn't be easy when I ordered it.'

Commander Spengler sat straight in his chair, bearing the attack he felt was most unfairly being directed at him.

'I've suspected since I arrived that things haven't been going fast enough at McMurdo,' the admiral went on, 'and I don't think the weather is altogether to blame. Now if there is something worrying you, for God's sake say so.'

Commander Spengler bit his lip and came to the point of decision. He looked at the admiral's eyes. 'In my opinion Commander Keeler feels that his men shouldn't be exposed to making a runway in such conditions, that he is taking unnecessary risks and probably the whole flight is unnecessary anyway,'

Spengler tried to hold the admiral's eyes after his outburst, but he found he had to look away.

'What proof have you got of this?'

'None.' Commander Spengler was in trouble. 'But you asked me for my opinion and I've given it to you honestly. I didn't want to, but you asked, so I did.'

'I see,' said Admiral Canaris. 'So what you are saying is that one of my senior officers is being something of an obstructionist?'

Commander Spengler looked steadfastly at the white pad and the yellow pencil on the table before him. 'I'm not exactly saying that, but it is four days since the orders came out that a runway must be built down there, and a flare path put out, and as yet nothing much has happened. They say it is because of the weather.'

'And I say they damn well aren't trying.' The admiral drummed the table with his fingers while they waited for him to go on.

'Listen,' he said, in a tone of reasonableness, 'this flight is on. That was decided in Washington and it's final. What have we got down there? A sick boy with a brain tumour that will kill him unless we get him out. We get him in darkness, in mid winter, and we show the Russians, everybody in fact, that we can go anywhere at any time. And remember those back home, especially those who hold the purse strings on this whole task force, we have got to show them our strength, power and ability, so they will not forget.'

'And if we fail, we get ourselves a bucket of shit.' Commander Sciple had spoken without thinking. He didn't know how it had happened but his thoughts had become words.

The admiral ignored him.

'We do not fail.' The voice was heavy, flat and final. 'No,' he added, 'we don't fail because there is no such thing as failure. Not in my command. You understand that?'

The men around the table all nodded. Doubt had been swept away. They believed.

'Right,' said Canaris. 'The skis are being fitted to the C-130 today and then we'll be ready to go. Tell McMurdo to get that strip ready and the flare path put out immediately because we're going.

'That is to be done straight away. When I get back here at midday I want full readiness reports and from you, Henry, I want the weather, complete, from here, McMurdo and the island stations to the south, and your forecasts.'

'Right,' said Captain Hershberger.

The admiral's chair squeaked on the linoleum as he pushed it back and stood up. The officers rose with him. The hand on the electric clock on the wall jumped a fraction to 3.45

'I'm going home now,' said the admiral. He began to walk quickly away but then stopped by Commander Sciple. 'Set up a press conference for 12.30, here.' Without another word he went through the door and down the corridor towards the waiting car.

Commander Sciple looked around the remaining group. 'There has to be a goddam press conference. We can't do anything without letting the goddam world know.'

'Isn't that what you are here for?' asked Commander Spengler venomously.

'I nearly forgot.' Sciple feigned politeness. 'And so did you apparently, judging by what little preparations have been made so far about anything.'

Burning with resentment Commander Splengler took the insult without retorting. The trouble was that Sciple was the admiral's man. What he had said before and got away with proved it. He was too close to the admiral to get at.

'You know it too, you little rat,' thought Commander Spengler as Sciple walked away.

The admiral's car swished along the wet and deserted streets and when it turned into Kolmar Avenue he saw his house. A light was shining in an upstairs bedroom as were the three lights along the driveway leading to the front door.

The car pulled up silently and the driver got out and lifted the luggage out of the boot. 'I'll handle it,' the admiral told him.

'Good night, sir,' said the driver. 'What time in the morning?'

'Be here at ten to twelve,' the admiral replied, turning away as he heard the front door open.

'Peter,' said Gwen, running down the steps and throwing her arms around him.

'I knew you'd be up,' he said, holding her at arm's length

and then pulling her towards him again. 'I knew you'd be up when the plane was coming in.'

'Oh, you'll be so tired,' she said, hanging on to his arm and leading him inside. 'I rang up Commander Spengler before I went to bed and he said three o'clock and then I heard the plane coming in.'

Dropping his bag in the hallway the admiral walked into the living room with his wife and sat down with her on the sofa in front of the fire.

'My, you're a pretty woman and dressed up too.'

She got up and stood before him with her back to the fire. 'You didn't think I'd welcome home my husband in a dressing gown and slippers did you?'

He looked at her carefully; neat black shoes, blue dress with a white trim running from hem to neckline and her hair, which fell forward towards her shining brown eyes.

'You,' said Peter Canaris, 'are the best looking wife in the Navy.'

'Don't be silly.' She slid down beside him again. 'The girls would have been too excited to sleep if I'd told them you were coming tonight so I said it would be in the morning.'

'How are they?' he wanted to know.

'Fine, just fine. Oh Peter, it's so wonderful to have you back, but a flight to the ice in the mid winter! It's so terrible even in the summer, but in the winter; and they say you are going too.' She gripped his arm tightly and put her head on his shoulder.

'There will be nothing to it, Gwen. We'll just go in, get that boy and be out again in a matter of hours,' he reassured her.

'You'd like some coffee?' she asked.

'Not now,' he answered tiredly.

'But why have you got to go with them, Peter, why can't they just go in without you?' She came close to him again. 'Peter, I'm scared.'

His arm went around her shoulder and his grip tightened.

'When the first flight to the South Pole was made, Admiral Byrd was in charge and he went along. When the first plane landed at the South Pole, Admiral Dufek was in command and he was aboard it. Whenever anything special has been done in the Antarctic since we have been there, the admiral has been there. I'm the ice admiral now and it's up to me.'

'You are going to go just because the others went.' He felt her stiffen a little. 'Do you really have to do what they did, Peter, you're not just doing it so your name will be in books or something?'

The question irked him and he let her go. 'If I didn't know better I'd think you'd been talking to Keeler.' The flash of temper passed quickly and he reached out for her again as she recoiled.

'Peter, Peter, why are you so angry? I'm just frightened for you.'

'I'm sorry, honey, but we had a talk before I came out here tonight and I found out that Keeler is delaying putting in that airstrip, because, buttoned up in his little kingdom down there for the winter, he doesn't approve of the flight. He'd stop it if he could.'

Peter Canaris groped with his free hand for his cigarettes. 'I think he's got in the back of his mind that it's all vainglory on my part. He just can't or he won't see things the way they are and he doesn't understand all the implications. However, he's going to do what he's ordered and we're going to go.'

His hand shook a little as he lit his cigarette. She took it and held it, feeling the straining sinews.

'You are a determined man, Peter.'

He smoked in silence for a few moments and when the tension passed he was tired again.

'Let's go to bed, Gwen, I've got to be out at the base again in a few hours and I guess the girls will come romping in early.'

She walked out to the kitchen and switched off the light and when she rejoined him he had already dowsed the living-room light and was waiting in the semi-darkness. She sensed he was weary and led him up the stairs.

At the bedroom door she stopped and whispered to him, 'Remind me to tell you some time that you're a very great man and I love you,' and then hurried away to the bathroom.

As he always did, Peter Canaris hung up his uniform carefully and then put on the pyjamas which had been placed for him on the end of the bed. As he was enjoying the first few moments of the luxury of the bed and settling himself comfortably into the pillow, Gwen returned.

She shed her dress and undies quickly and slipped the lacy

nightdress over her head and then walked towards the bed.

'Come here, come here you little wench,' said Canaris, and he drew her into bed beside him. He kissed her and ran his hand down her back pressing her closer. She stiffened in resistance and turned her head slightly away.

'It's so late, Peter, and you're tired.'

'I'm not tired any more,' he answered and he drew her back to him and tenderly kissed her neck.

'Peter I'm so afraid about that flight,' she whispered to him.

'We won't talk about that now,' he said. 'I haven't seen you for fourteen weeks.'

She sighed and pressed closer and the ecstasy for him began when she undid the cord on his pyjamas.

'I told you before you were a determined man,' she said.

Then she crept over him and the softness of her inflamed him and drove him on relentlessly. When he was spent she moved herself away for a few minutes and then snuggled in beside him again. He reached down for her hand and held it while she went to sleep.

When he first tried to sleep himself his thoughts troubled him. Why had she thought the way that Keeler did? I am not a vainglorious man he told himself. But his final thoughts were about the uneasy cold sea they would cross and the darkness and ice that would await them. Then, thankfully, sleep claimed him too.

Eight

THE mess hall at McMurdo Sound wasn't big enough to accommodate all the enlisted men at rush hour and some had to wait in the corridor. A section of tables was reserved for officers and as they were never all present together there was always plenty of room. It was one of the few times at the base that officers exercised any special privileges over the men but Commander Keeler never quite adjusted himself to it. He still

found it distasteful to push past the line of waiting men.

Inside the mess room, however, equality was restored again. The commander and his lieutenant, Parsons, stood in line and shuffled past the rows of cooks who ladled the steaming food on to their plates.

The mess was a happy and cheerful place and Commander Keeler always enjoyed its atmosphere. There was a constant scraping of chairs and feet as the men moved around, intermingled with the tinkling of cutlery and the murmur of conversation as the men ate. Those who had finished their breakfast were dawdling over coffee and cigarettes. Knife and fork in hand, Commander Keeler surveyed them happily. Good men, he thought, every one of them.

He didn't see Smolenski come into the mess but as soon as he heard the voice he realised who was standing just behind him. He turned around and looked into the troubled eyes.

'Beg pardon, sir, but you'd better come up to communications,' Smolenski said in a low voice. The commander looked at Smolenski enquiringly.

'There are orders coming through from Christchurch, sir, about the airstrip. I think it is something you should look at right away.'

Smolenski waited uneasily as Commander Keeler calmly finished his breakfast. 'All right,' he said, getting up and returning his knife, fork and plate to the servery, 'we'll have the coffee later.'

Lieutenant Parsons stood up also and the three men walked out of the mess, Parsons and Smolenski deferring to the commander at the door let let him go first.

Outside the commander zipped up his jacket and, putting his head down, barged off into the wind.

An occasional truck rolled past them but the only other noise came from the loader working on the virgin snow slopes beyond the camp. Round the clock the loader carved into snow, bringing back endless tons to be fed to the melters. It was their only source of water. There was enough for drinking and cooking and one shower a week but the melters couldn't provide enough to fight a fire, not even a small one.

They kicked the dry snow off their boots as they entered the communications hut and Smolenski, first over to the desk,

picked up the sheaf of messages and handed it to Commander Keeler.

The orders were explicit and final. Get the airstrip prepared without further delay. Keeler passed the pages one by one to his lieutenant.

'They can't mean this. Haven't we told them what the weather is like at present?' Parsons asked in alarm.

'If you knew Admiral Canaris like I know him you'd know the trouble we're in for. The vain bastard,' he said under his breath. 'So you are determined to have your Antarctic first, are you?'

Commander Keeler returned alone to his quarters and sat down in his armchair. It was not too bad for an Antarctic base really, well heated, carpet on the floor, pictures on the wall and comfortable furniture. Obviously someone in supplies thought that the men in the south should be well looked after. He called to his steward, Elias, and he automatically appeared with a cup of coffee.

As Keeler sipped it, there was a knock at the door and the doctor, Lieutenant-Commander Heatherington, came in. 'Good morning, Commander,' he said. 'I hear we've got our worries this morning.'

'Get the doctor a cup,' the commander instructed Elias. He spilt some coffee on his pants as he moved and rubbed it off with his hand. 'Sit down, Doc. How is that boy this morning.'

'I would say he was comfortable and not in much pain at the moment but the trouble with brain tumours is that they keep growing steadily but not constantly. When they do grow the only thing they can do is press against the skull. That's serious.'

'What more can you do for him here?'

The doctor stirred his coffee. 'Not much more, I'm afraid. This is a job for a neurologist and you need special facilities.'

Commander Keeler pulled his long legs up under his chin and sat forward. 'Now I'm really serious about this. What hope would he have of lasting out until October when the first planes come in?'

'None I'd say,' the doctor told him candidly. 'Maybe a few weeks at the outside, but he has got to get that specialist attention which we can't give him here. A sudden deterioration and

he could go any time. I'm sorry, but that's the way it is.'

'I got orders this morning to prepare an airstrip regardless because as soon as it is ready the admiral is going to fly in and take Giovanni out.'

'They're persisting in that madness? Instead of losing one they run the risk of losing a dozen, maybe.' Commander Heatherington gave his coffee some more unnecessary stirring. 'It's hard to believe, isn't it? Even I say, why rush things? and there is no one keener than me to get that boy out.'

'It's nevertheless true and there is nothing I can do about it. I'm going to have to build that airstrip.'

'Bloody madness,' said the doctor. 'Out there in 40 below zero, building a strip. Incidentally, I'm interested. How do you build a strip?'

'Even out about five thousand yards of the bay ice, compact the snow and set out flare pots. Then we'd have to haul a GCA trailer out there. The strip would have to be about three miles out so there were no obstructions along the approach line.'

'If you are going to have men working machines out there in that dark and cold then I'm going to be busy.'

'You're right, and that's what I have been afraid of since it was first suggested. Believe me, I've tried everything I know to block it but it's on now.'

Keeler spoke with concern. 'I've never felt so responsible for men as I do down here. You ever been up to Scott's cross?' he asked suddenly.

'I don't think I'd make it up there,' said the doctor patting his stomach. The 400 ft. Observation Hill on which the lonely cross stood was too tough a pull for him.

'I've been up there twice now,' Commander Keeler said. 'It's a strange feeling to stand up there and look out across the ice. I get the feeling of following in Scott's footsteps, but on a much grander scale. You can't compare the equipment of course. However, I thought up there I knew something of how Scott must have felt, you know, having the responsibility of his men, and that sort of thing.'

The doctor agreed sympathetically. 'There's nothing odd about that. You've got more men to worry about than Scott had, or even Admiral Byrd for that matter, and they're travel-

ling further and faster too.'

'My God, don't I know it.'

'Well,' said the doctor rising and putting an affectionate hand on the commander's shoulder, 'you don't need me to tell you that you've done a good job, but if it's any help, let me say I think that you're probably the best damned commander they've had down here and there's not a man on the base who doesn't think so.'

'Get on your rounds, Doc, and take your Irish tongue with you.' Commander Keeler came back to normal.

With a chuckle the doctor went through the door and strode down the corridor to his own quarters. On the way he passed another doorway. 'Admiral's Country,' the sign read, 'Keep out.'

Nothing would keep the admiral out of anywhere once he made up his mind, thought Heatherington. That was for sure.

The base had become busy by the time Commander Keeler walked between the huts to the steam-heated head, his rubber boots crunching on the hard snow furrows made by the heavy trucks. The growling of the diesel motors which supplied the power was amplified by the wind which swirled long strands of dry snow towards him.

Occasional lights snapped on in the dark buildings which made the windows peer at him like dragon's eyes. He liked walking about in the early morning, especially in the summer when he could climb a little way up Observation Hill and look down on the camp.

From there it looked insignificant compared with the great sprawl of the frozen sea and the line of mountains on the horizon, beyond them was the great ice desert, and the serrated tops of buried mountains, stretching back towards the Pole.

Long since then had the commander admitted to himself that he felt more securely in command of the cluster of buildings and the acres of machinery than he ever had on a ship.

He had put everywhere outside the base out of bounds, except by special permission, and in his two years of command not a single life had been lost. On the first day he had arrived he had seen the four lonely crosses, bleached white by the wind-driven snow, one marking a grave, the others reminders of men who had never been found. He decided there and then that there

would be no need to erect more crosses while he was in charge.

As he expected, the head was deserted and he had its comforting heat and strongly disinfectant smell to himself. He hung his jacket on a peg, unbuckled his belt and sat down contentedly.

He was interrupted twice. The first time was when the fatigue men arrived and lifted the flap beneath so that they could remove the honeybuckets. The cold blast of inrushing air made him wince.

Then three men came in and went to the wash-basins where the commander couldn't see them.

'What I reckon,' one of them said, 'is that someone is going to get the idea that something should be done about that poor little critter Giovanni, in the sick bay.'

'Like what?' the man next to him asked.

'Like coming in here and getting him out.'

'Aw, come off it, there won't be any planes down here for months yet and that's the only way you'll get him out.'

'That's the way you and I might see it, Mac, but I've gotta feeling that as the admiral hasn't done anything spectacular for months, organising a winter flight down here and coming in himself is just the sort of thing he would do.'

'Damn them,' thought Commander Keeler, 'they don't know anything about it but they're thinking on the same crazy lines as the admiral.'

A few seconds later he barged past the men and washed his hands and left without saying a word.

'What's got into him this morning?' O'Reagen, the tubby one, whispered in the direction of the retreating form.

'Like I told you, Mac, don't never worry about officers,' said the man with the towel, 'there's no accounting for what they say or do.'

Although he heard, Commander Keeler kept walking, his irritation passing quickly. They hadn't known he was there and idle chatter like that was always going on in the head. The recreation room, as some of them called it.

He stumped down the wide street, Nimitz Avenue. They were all named after admirals, the next one would be Canaris Avenue. He hoped that he would be far out of it with a Stateside posting by the time that happened.

A Snowcat clanked up beside him and stopped, a cloud of

white smoke squirting from its exhaust, and a fat jolly face looked out when the window was pulled back.

'Can I give you a lift somewhere?' asked Lieutenant Smith, the Seabees officer. He kept revving the motor, afraid that it would stop and not wanting to shout above the din the commander said nothing until he had climbed in beside him.

'Let's go down to your office, I want to talk to you.'

'O.K.,' said Smith amiably, and the Snowcat skidded for a moment as he opened the throttle and then moved swiftly off towards the huge hangar-like building on the fringe of the camp where the Seabees had their headquarters.

There were no street lights but the big solitary lamp on the outside of the building penetrated far enough into the gloom to light up some of the bulldozers, graders and scrapers that would work almost around the clock when daylight came again.

In his office, his jacket unzipped, his fur-lined cap pushed back off his head and a cigar between his teeth, Smith looked at Commander Keeler as he perched himself on the edge of the desk.

His back to the oil stove, the commander couldn't help grinning as he regarded Smith. The man must weigh at least 220lbs if he was an ounce.

'You're piling on the beef.'

Smith chuckled. 'We got to. You work us so hard in the summer that we've got to get ready and store up energy in the winter.'

Smith liked Commander Keeler. He had proved to be everything that he heard he was before he had first met him. A tall gaunt man with his own ideas about discipline and, on the ice, careful to the point where it was almost a fault. Above all though, a fair man who would listen to technical men and take their advice. There were too many navigating officers who thought they knew everything.

Commander Keeler got down to business. 'You're not going to like this any more than I do but I've been ordered to prepare a strip and set up a flare path for a night flight down here from Christchurch, and right away.'

'For crissake no.' Smith fumbled in his jacket for his lighter, and thought hard as he thumbed the wheel and then put the flame to his burnt out cigar. 'I thought they'd been talked out

of that idea when it first came up last week.'

'So did I but they haven't and it's past the stage of arguing now. There was an order in this morning, from the admiral, from the great man himself.' Immediately Commander Keeler regretted the slip. He didn't ever talk about the admiral like that to anyone. He sat down in the chair behind Smith's desk and pulled it in until he was sitting up straight.

'We've got our orders and they're clear enough. The point is, can you do it? I know, of course, you can do anything,' he added encouragingly.

'Sure, sure. The impossible we do every day, miracles just take a little longer.' Smith was calculating.

His mind ran over the men and machines he had and the maintenance programme which would have to come to a halt. Why the hell did they want to make a flight?

'Do they know what it will be like building an airstrip out there?' he asked.

Commander Keeler drew a series of pyramids on the blotter in front of him, and listened to Smith raise every objection he could think of and why he didn't want to send his men out to work on the sea ice in winter. It was best to let him get it off his chest before getting down to specific detail.

At last the lieutenant had finished. He lifted the top of the stove and threw his cigar stump into it angrily and swung around and faced the commander.

'What the hell does the admiral know about building airstrips, let alone in mid-winter in the dark?'

'I don't know and I don't care,' said Commander Keeler coldly. Smith had gone far enough. 'What I want from you is an assurance that the job can be done and I also want to know how long it will take.'

'Opening my big mouth too wide is a fault of mine, I'm sorry,' Smith told him. 'Excuse me,' he added, leaning past the commander and taking a folder out of a drawer. For a few moments he thumbed through the sheafs of paper.

Commander Keeler waited patiently. Smith was no longer the jolly fat man. How was it that people often thought that fat men were soft when so often they could be really tough. A fat man turned nasty was worse than a thin one any day but the big advantage of the fat men was that they didn't seem to hold

grudges, not Smith anyway.

The Lieutenant interrupted his thoughts. 'Going by this, the airstrip we built last summer took most of August, September and the first half of October. It was five thousand feet long and my men worked a total of 100,000 hours on it. In daylight of course.'

Commander Keeler took the paper from Smith and read it himself. 'That job included taxi ways and a long parking area. All we want this time is a simple strip five thousand feet long. How long will that take?'

'With a lot of luck and reasonable weather, a month.'

'I'll give you forty-eight hours, that's all you've got to get that strip ready,' said Commander Keeler.

'Oh, the sonofabitch.' Smith didn't care what he said or who heard it. 'It's all right for him to sit up there in Chi Chi, "do this", or "do that". But he wants me to put my men out there, to build a goddam airfield, and get the poor bastards half frost-bitten to death, just so he can make a fancy flight in his goddam aeroplanes and fly home and get a medal or something.'

Commander Keeler stabbed Smith in the stomach with a long, hard finger. 'You're forgetting just one thing.' Smith winced, but the powerful finger stabbed again and brought him to his senses.

'What is that?' he asked obediently.

'That there is a very sick man here whom the doctor doesn't think can last out until the planes start coming in the spring.'

Smith looked uneasy. The commander was right. He had forgotten about Giovanni.

The first time he had seen him had been in Club Erebus, the enlisted men's club which Smith and his Seabees had built. They'd worked on the building for practically forty-eight hours non-stop to get it completed and as a special favour he had been invited to the opening party. So far as he knew he was the only officer who'd ever been invited into the club.

That was some night. Only beer was sold there and each can was opened as it was brought. Smith remembered how he'd sat at a table demonstrating his strength by laying an empty can down, putting a finger on the middle of it and then smashing down with his other fist to crush the can almost flat.

Little Giovanni, his black hair falling over his eyes, had

weaved up. 'I show you a trick with beer cans you can't do,' he said, 'but first we must drink enough cans.'

Smith's Seabees tackled the task with enthusiasm but Giovanni had his helpers too. They drank a case of beer before he was ready to start.

With studied concentration, Giovanni stacked six cans, one above the other and spurning any assistance built three similar columns.

Then he sprang up on to the table with an agility that surprised everyone and bent down and put the palm of his hands on top of two of the columns.

'Hey, Giovanni, you an acrobat or something?' Lieutenant Smith had asked him.

'You see.' The beery smile disappeared from Giovanni and his lips set over his shining white teeth. He tested the strain on the columns and when the muscles in his arms and shoulders stood firm and hard, slowly took all the weight on them and lifted his feet off the table.

There was a hush as he gradually raised his feet until he at last stood on his hands, perfectly erect, his toes reaching for the ceiling. In his concentration he was oblivious of the audience which broke into a cheer and moved closer to him, but stopped as he took all the weight on his left arm and reached carefully with his right for the third column of cans. When he found it and steadied himself he transferred his weight again and with his left hand, found the fourth column.

To the consternation of everyone both Giovanni's arms began to tremble and the columns of cans began to sway.

'Look out,' called the lieutenant in alarm. Giovanni fell backwards but to everyone's surprise he landed lightly on his toes and wheeled around beaming to face them.

'You can do that trick, lieutenant?'

'Not even if a thousand bucks were at stake. Where did you learn that, Giovanni?' Smith still hardly believed what he had seen.

'In what they say, a house of ill fame,' grinned Giovanni and lurched off in search of more beer.

'He'd learn better tricks than that one there,' Smith observed to his men as he got up to go. He decided the party was getting

to the stage when officers, invited or not, should be on their way.

That was the little Giovanni now in the sick bay.

'You thinking about something?' asked Commander Keeler.

'I was just thinking that I had forgotten about Giovanni.' The lieutenant was still half lost in thought. 'I'll get my boys together now and have a talk with them. If it has to be done, we'll do it all right,' he said resignedly.

Commander Keeler moved to go. 'Just one thing,' said Smith. 'I think we'd better make that strip six thousand feet for safety, in case the weather packs up while they're trying to get down.'

As he walked back to the administration building Commander Keeler looked over to McMurdo Sound, faintly visible in the night. There was something remotely menacing about it. He wished the long day was not five months away.

Nine

HER arms around their shoulders Mrs Canaris ushered the girls from the room. 'Go and get dressed, quickly now', and they scampered up the passage in their pyjamas, pushing each other in their enthusiasm to get to their bedroom door first.

She watched them go, then shutting the door she turned back to her husband. 'Are you satisfied now?'

'Nearly; come here.' When she walked over and coyly stood back from the bed, a browned arm reached out and grabbed the hem of her dressing gown. 'Come here when I tell you.'

Pulling her down to the pillow Peter Canaris kissed her cheek. 'You take good care of my girls,' he said proudly. For a moment she basked in the embrace and then pulled away. 'You want to go back to sleep, Peter?' she asked. 'It's only half-past eight.'

Propping himself up on one side of the pillow Canaris eyed her with mock sternness. 'More sleep when the work is done. I'll ring Spengler and see what progress he has made and I want to get in touch with Sciple too. I want to see he has set

that press conference up properly. He's reliable, but this one has got to go well.'

Sweeping the sheets back he bounded from the bed and strode across to the telephone on the dressing table.

Gwen Canaris watched calculatingly. At fifty-one, she thought, he was still every inch a man, all six feet of him. She liked the stiff curliness of his iron-grey hair, the thick mat of black hair on his chest and the strong fingers with the tufts of hair growing above the knuckles.

Her thoughts were interrupted when Peter Canaris started barking into the telephone.

He had a series of questions and grunted when given the answers. He then issued a series of orders as if he were spitting out a mouthful of tacks. His brusqueness and bad manners dismayed her and she tackled him about it when he finished.

'Peter, speaking to Mr Spengler like that, I never thought you could be so rude. You didn't give him a chance to say anything before you were biting his head off.'

Canaris surveyed his wife calmly but there was no warmth in his voice.

'You are like many other women, my dear, you don't see any difference between the man at home and the man at his work, but there is a big difference. When I'm with you and the girls then I'm just the ordinary guy you married. When I'm at work. it's different. An operation of this size has got to have a boss. I'm it.'

She tried to say something but he hadn't finished.

'I keep my work from you deliberately because you wouldn't understand it. You don't know how I have to go about things to get them done. I keep them sweating when the pressure's on, and I get results.'

A tear appeared and she brushed it away. 'I'm sorry, Peter, I forgot that you're tired and edgy.'

'What have you got to be sorry about?' he asked kindly. 'And say, what am I doing sounding off like this?' With his arm around her shoulder he led her over to the dressing table and sat her down. 'Give me a smile.'

She managed a smile and then locked her arms around his chest and pulled on him. He returned the pressure but as he looked over her head he was thinking again. He didn't like the

news he had got from Commander Spengler very much at all.

Gwen Canaris faded into the background. He didn't notice her go as he quickly dressed.

The car taking him out to the base cut across the heart of Christchurch, which he had been told was the most English of all the New Zealand cities, and he believed it. There was a quiet refinement about the houses and the trees, especially the weeping willows which drooped over the Avon and the other streams with their manicured banks which wandered unhurriedly towards the sea.

The people were courteous and friendly and only too willing to oblige but they had been totally unprepared for the massive invasion of American service personnel the Antarctic operations had thrust upon them.

'Why are Americans such nice people individually but such terrible people collectively when they go outside their own country?' a Christchurch superintendent of police had asked him the previous summer, after a weekend in which over a thousand men under his command had been on leave in the city.

Thinking about that weekend still annoyed him. The trouble started with the girls. Whether it was the money, the flowers, the courtesies they had never received before, the uniforms or the American voices, Admiral Canaris didn't know. But it was a fact that typists, shopgirls and housewives became, in their dozens, little more than pushovers when the Americans arrived.

He didn't need a superintendent of police to tell him, he had seen it himself, the girls throwing themselves at his men, who greedily took advantage of it, and he didn't blame them. Not after a long spell on the ice.

'I'll swear half these dames come into town prepared with no pants on,' he had told the police as they surveyed a weekend.

The police agreed with him but they pointed out that some of the girls were only thirteen and fourteen years old. They produced the list of cars that drunken sailors had wrecked, enumerated the fights there had been when the New Zealanders had tried to get their girls back, and politely asked the admiral to keep his men under control.

'You do that and we'll look after ours,' they promised. He

had kept his part of the bargain and acted with a harshness that appalled some of his officers.

'Jesus, admiral, they're not angels,' Commander Sciple said when the admiral acted ruthlessly with troublemakers.

'I know they're not but they're not going to foul up this nest. This is the only country in the world where "Go Home Yank" placards are carried by Americans, boys who want leave. I'm going to keep it that way.'

That last summer occupied the admiral's thoughts as the car sped across Christchurch to the airport. Without a doubt he had kept his men under control, but still the task force had made a mighty big impression on the city.

For a start it had never become quite used to the big aircraft roaring in and out at all times of the day and night, loading on men and supplies for the ice and returning with other men seeing green grass and trees for the first time in a year.

Admiral Canaris found the city and the people easy to like. If he hadn't turned down most of the invitations he received his summer months there would have been one long round of parties. He gave four a season himself and he considered it money well spent. This was the finest foreign country in the world to have a base in, he told everyone in Washington.

The sentry at the gate to the base snapped to attention as his car rolled past but the admiral didn't see him. He was looking across the tarmac to where a cluster of men were busily fixing the giant skis to the C-130. That was one job running to schedule anyway.

A shower an hour before had freshened Commander Spengler but the droop of his eyes showed he had missed his night's sleep.

'Good morning, sir,' he said and felt better when he received a smile in acknowledgement. 'They're waiting for you.'

'Lead the way,' he instructed Commander Spengler, and followed him down the corridor. The buzz of conversation stopped as soon as they entered the room.

As soon as he was seated Canaris thanked the officers for the work they had done in the hours since he last saw them.

'I know that you are all tired and I am sorry that it has been necessary for you to keep at this thing which I guess kept most of you out of your beds, but we do not have much time

and there is a lot to be done.'

Sitting on the admiral's left, Commander Sciple doodled on a pad. Commander Spengler sat rigidly on his right. The remainder of the officers sitting around the table nodded deferentially and waited.

'I'd like to hear from each of you, you first Ralph, if you don't mind.'

Commander Spengler read from his typewritten notes, not missing a single detail. A lot of it seemed inconsequential to the admiral.

'Get on with it, Ralph,' he demanded. 'What about the work on the airstrip.'

'If the weather holds there Commander Keeler expects it to be ready in forty-eight hours.'

'It better be; I'm not asking for La Guardia, just a strip.'

'Excuse me,' said Captain Hershberger, 'but I don't think it will be possible to get away for at least forty-eight hours anyway.'

He unrolled a map and spread it out on the table before him. Everyone listened intently while he explained what he believed would be the pattern of the weather between McMurdo Sound and Christchurch for the next few days.

His silver pencil followed the precise lines he had drawn on the map and he drawled on. He traced isobars with loving care, and carefully explained the intricacy of every pressure system.

The admiral brought him back to earth. 'Just a moment, before you lose all of us in that mass of lines and wiggles you've got there. Is what you are trying to say that for the next few days the headwinds south will make flying tough?'

Captain Hershberger came up from his map and looked at the admiral over the top of his rimless glasses.

'That in essence would be a truthful summary, admiral.'

'And how many stations do you base all this on?'

The captain looked at his map again. 'Well, as usual, we can call on a good deal of co-operation. There's New Zealand station on Campbell Island four hundred miles south, the Australian station at Macquarrie Island, another two hundred miles further south, and then there are our two stations at

Cape Hallett, on the edge of the continent, and of course, McMurdo itself.'

'And quite a sizeable gap between Cape Hallett and Macquarrie Island from which we will know nothing until the picket ship gets into position?'

'Quite so, sir.' Hershberger was unperturbed. 'However, I doubt if they will tell us much that we don't already know, and then there is the situation at McMurdo itself. From what they tell me, and what I know about conditions there myself, their weather will deteriorate very badly for the next few days and if it does, the way we see it at this stage, work on the strip will be at a standstill and any flying at all will be out of the question.'

Captain Hershberger looked up at the admiral again expectantly. Canaris locked his fingers together and cracked a knuckle but said nothing. Silence oppressed the room.

Once more Captain Hershberger consulted his map. 'The good thing,' he added hopefully, 'is that McMurdo will get a severe storm but it won't be on the katabatic scale.'

Stopping his doodling, Commander Sciple drew the captain's attention, stabbing towards him with his pencil. 'What's a katabatic storm, just in case someone asks me later?'

'Allow me to tell my public information officer what he should already know,' the admiral said, before Captain Hershberger could reply.

'A katabatic storm comes about when the layer of cold and heavy air on the Polar Plateau flows down the ice slopes and gathers speed. It does more than a hundred miles an hour sometimes. You've never seen a real blizzard till you've seen a katabatic storm. If you got one here it'd level this town.'

The admiral turned back to Captain Hershberger.

'I've got to hand it to you,' thought Sciple, 'there's not too much that you don't know.'

The enlightenment of his PIO who nearly always had the answers to everything pleased the admiral and his tone was more friendly.

'Well, the bright side to your story, Bob, is that if we haven't got something on the katabatic scale to worry about at McMurdo it's possible to be optimistic and think that a bit of blow there won't last very long?'

A natural caution made Captain Hershberger think for a moment before he answered.

'Under normal circumstances, yes, it could be quite cold, but comparatively settled, settled enough anyway to get the strip built, but the flight will have to be a straight in and out affair when it comes off, there ought not to be any undue hanging around there, not at this time of the year.'

'In and out is exactly what it will be,' Admiral Canaris told him. 'All we want the weather to do is to settle long enough for us to get down there, pick that boy up and get out. Once we're on the way back it can do what it likes there.'

Captain Hershberger smiled wanly. 'It would help me, admiral, if I was sure you understood that I don't control the weather, I only forecast it.'

'A meteorologist is a man who can look into a girl's eyes and tell whether,' Commander Sciple scrawled on a piece of paper and slid it along the table to the admiral. He put on his glasses to read it and chuckled a little.

'Commander Sciple is a little too flippant about you met. boys, captain, you'll have to speak to him about it some time.'

Before Hershberger could ask what Sciple was being flippant about the admiral was turning round to Commander Spengler. 'Let's hear more of your tale of woe, Ralph,' he asked genially.

Commander Spengler again began to explain everything he had done since the admiral had gone home to bed.

'Maybe we can save a little time, Ralph,' said Canaris when the commander began to read the details of the messages that had passed between himself and the McMurdo command. 'Are they getting on with that airstrip?'

'I'd be very surprised if they are not working on it at this minute.'

'Good, then I don't think we need go into it any more.' Standing up the admiral indicated to his officers to remain seated. 'I've got this press conference in a few minutes and I have a couple of matters to attend to before then, but I'd like to see you all again after lunch. I'll be eating here,' he nodded to Commander Spengler, eased his way around behind two chairs and disappeared through the door.

There was a look of puzzlement on Commander Spengler's face. He leaned over towards Sciple. 'I can't understand him.

When he came in I'd have sworn he'd have raised hell about the airstrip again, but after he gets the bad news about the weather he's nearly all smiles, cuts me short while I'm telling him what I've done and then gets up and leaves as happy as if he were on his way to get a citation. I can't make him out.'

Sciple offered Spengler a cigarette and held a match out for him. 'You've got a lot to learn about the admiral yet, Ralph.'

'What do you mean?'

'Just this, he never wastes any time in battling the inevitable. We're not as shrewd as he is. When we run into a brick wall we keep battering our heads against it. Not the admiral though, when he runs into a brick wall he looks for another way round. If there was anything he could do about the weather he'd do it, don't make any mistake about that, but when he heard what the position was, it took a load off his mind, made him feel a lot easier because just for the moment the bad weather is inevitable and, as I told you before, shrewd men like the admiral don't battle something they can't handle.'

'You could be right,' muttered Spengler as he chewed it over. 'I usually am about him.' Sciple stood up. 'I'll have to go and set that press conference up. Got to have those boys in the right frame of mind for the admiral. See you.'

He walked along the corridor jauntily. Dealing with the Press was more in his line than sitting through staff conferences.

'Ladies and gentlemen, the President of News Media,' announced Sciple as he stepped into the room and an enthusiastic burst of clapping greeted him. He was among old friends whom he had cultivated carefully in the past two years and a quick round of handshakes took him around most of the group.

Breaking off he walked into the centre of the room and held up his hands. 'All right,' he said, 'I surrender. I wouldn't answer any phone calls this morning, I just couldn't. I know how you can worm things out of me, but this time friends, the admiral's running things and he's making the announcements. Anyway it wouldn't make any difference as you've really only had a short time to wait and it'll be worth waiting for.'

The room was attentively silent except for the television technician swearing to himself as he fiddled with a stubborn cable connection.

Nigel McPherson from the *Christchurch Star* frowned in

mock severity at the commander. 'You give me the run-around again like you did this morning and I'll start writing "Yank Go Home" stories.'

Sciple entered into the spirit of things. 'O.K. Comrade McPherson, you representing *Izvestia* out here now?'

Everyone laughed and Sciple resumed his round of greetings. He liked New Zealand pressmen who were so quiet and so much less demanding than their American counterparts. They could be stubbornly determined when they felt like it but he was still puzzled by their odd habit of accepting news gratefully. Everywhere else reporters demanded it as a right.

He hoped the New Zealanders wouldn't pick up any bad habits until his tour of duty was over.

There was only one way Commander Sciple couldn't master them and that was when it came to drinking New Zealand beer, or any beer for that matter. He would get bloatedly drunk while they were still warming up. On whisky he could hold his own, but a man would drown before he could out-drink them on beer. The memory of the first time he had tried to was still painful.

It was McPherson who reminded him of it again. 'You going to hold another party like you did the first time you came out, commander?'

'We'll have one all right, but you've got to look after me and the admiral.'

A thought came to him. 'I was trying to remember when I got back to the States what it was you called hard liquor, what your natives called it.'

'You mean the Maori word for spirits, it's waipiro, "stinking water",' a perky brunette informed him.

'Hello, I haven't met you before.' Sciple advanced towards her.

'Dorothy Pearl,' she said, offering her hand, 'from the *Women's Journal*.'

'How come the *Women's Journal* is so interested in Operation 90 South?'

'Why we're interested is because you won't let any women go down to the ice and when one does I'm going to be the first,' Mrs Pearl told him vigorously. She tossed her curls and Commander Sciple grinned at her pert, upturned nose.

'Well, I'll certainly have to invite you to my next party and then we can really talk this thing out.'

Mrs Pearl joined in the laughter. 'I'd love to come to one of your parties, commander, but I'd have to bring my husband,' she said meaningfully.

Quite a character, Sciple decided, and he was grinning at her, thinking up a reply, when Admiral Canaris walked in.

'What's the joke?' he asked genially pleased that Sciple had prepared a smiling audience for him.

'You haven't met Mrs Pearl before, admiral. We're apparently going to see a lot of her next season because she's going to be the first woman reporter to the ice, and she'll be taking her husband.'

Admiral Canaris held her hand warmly. 'Commander Sciple handles all the difficult assignments in this operation,' he told her.

Mrs Pearl was not abashed. 'Now come on, admiral,' she pouted at him, 'we all know you have the say around here.'

The dangers in becoming entangled with a determined adversary like Mrs Pearl were obvious and the admiral hastily withdrew to the end of the room. 'Please be seated, ladies and gentlemen,' he said, 'I'm sure you are anxious that we should get under way.'

The strong lights for the television camera flooded the room and Admiral Canaris began to speak. 'I must say that I am pleased to see again some faces I know so well and after the rush of the last three days I'm hoping that it will be possible to keep you all adequately in the picture with what happens from now on.

'We were notified in Washington some days ago that one of our men at McMurdo Sound is dangerously ill with a brain tumour and unless he can receive specialised hospital attention, well beyond the limits of what can be given him down there, there are fears for him. So the problem is, do we leave him there or get him out? I'm happy to tell you what you already know, that we're going to bring him out.'

He smiled confidently at them and then became serious as he began to talk about the difficulties involved. Heads down his audience swiftly recorded every word.

Commander Sciple was watching closely. How well the

admiral was telling his story and putting himself right in the centre of it. There'd hardly been another name mentioned.

When he had finished the admiral ran through the main points again, counting them off on his fingers. The flight would be made as soon as the airstrip at McMurdo Sound was completed and the weather was favourable. Another C-130 or Hercules transport was also on its way out.

As the commander of the operation he felt it was his duty to make the flight.

By the time he sat down Canaris was certain that he had covered everything fully, but he knew from experience not to choke off a press conference without allowing questions.

'Now is there anything anyone wants to ask?' He lit a cigarette before looking up to catch an eye.

Nothing the admiral had said was much news to Nigel McPherson except that there was a second plane joining the first Hercules and he wanted to know more. 'What about the second plane, tell us a little more about that, admiral.'

'As you might guess, in the event of any trouble, it will do search and, I hope, rescue, out of Christchurch here. Call it our insurance if you like.'

Commander Sciple pushed across a note to the admiral.

'Oh yes. The commander of the second aircraft is Lieutenant Fortrose, whom some of you will remember is another of our very experienced ice pilots.'

Mrs Pearl was on her feet before the admiral sat down. 'As you will be setting a famous first, admiral, by being the first admiral to make a mid-winter flight to the Antarctic, how about another one by taking with you the first woman reporter? I'd be a starter.'

Admiral Canaris gave her a long look. 'One of these days, Mrs Pearl, it could so happen that I'd be delighted to take you along, but not on this occasion. The rules at present say no women and that's that I'm afraid.'

Mrs Pearl was still standing. She wasn't put off so easily.

'But you made the rule, admiral, so couldn't you break it?'

'No,' he said, louder than he meant to, and looked over her head to where another reporter was getting to his feet.

'Admiral, there is one sick man down there for whom I think we all have a great deal of sympathy and as I understand

it, it could be curtains for him unless he is brought out here to hospital. I'd say that this rescue mission is going to cost about a million dollars all told, but apart from that, don't you think that a lot of lives may be risked by trying to go in and get him?'

'That is one way of looking at it, but not the way we do. If we have the resources and the skill to make a flight such as this, then we think we should make it.'

'What does it prove?' the reporter persisted.

The admiral lowered his head towards Commander Sciple who whispered, 'Feltham, the *Time* stringer out here.'

'It will prove among other things, Mr Feltham, that the biggest and best trained assault force that has ever had anything to do with the Antarctic, and the only one which has a regular flying programme to the ice, can even go there in mid-winter if necessary.'

'The fact that you are going yourself and not your deputy or some other officer, does this have some significance for the operation, or you personally?' Feltham asked slyly.

'There is nothing vainglorious in this so far as I am personally concerned, Mr Feltham, it just gives me the opportunity to visit my men down there and make any decisions which otherwise may have to be referred to me in Washington.'

That settled Feltham who scribbled on his pad and did not comment further.

The questions continued until the admiral rose and said that everyone now knew as much about the mission as he did.

'I'd like to thank you all for attending,' he added quickly as he fumbled in his pocket and withdrew a handkerchief into which he sneezed loudly.

'Two for a kiss' observed Mrs Pearl as Admiral Canaris sneezed a second time.

'Admiral,' she asked sweetly, 'you wouldn't be getting a cold would you, because if you are, I would like to remind you that you were talking about your rules which can't be broken a few minutes ago. Isn't one of your rules that no person with a cold can go down to the ice until the danger has passed of him giving it to anyone in that germ-free air down there?'

With restraint Canaris answered. 'They say one swallow doesn't make a summer, Mrs Pearl and by the same token, two sneezes don't make a cold.'

Commander Sciple came to the rescue. 'I'm sure the admiral has answered you all to the best of his ability, and I'd just like to reassure you that I will be available for any further queries that might develop. If I can't help you then the Admiral surely will, but I'd like things to follow the usual pattern; all inquiries through me.'

'Thank you, admiral; thank you, commander,' the *Star* man, McPherson said, putting his notebook in his pocket. After a brief scraping of chairs the room emptied.

The admiral lit a cigarette. 'That didn't go too badly, did it?'

'Very well indeed I thought. They're not a bad bunch all round.' It was exactly the kind of conference Sciple had hoped it would be.

'That Pearl woman could be a bit of a nark.'

'Nothing to worry about, and anyway, she works for a monthly magazine. It's the daily Press and the TV who count.'

'Lunch first and then we'll get back to work again,' said Admiral Canaris.

Commander Sciple followed him through the door. He made no comment when Admiral Canaris sneezed again.

Ten

ONE by one Lieutenant Smith's men arrived and stood around waiting for him to start talking. They had been summoned from the workshops, the supply stores and, those not on duty, from the quarters and even the library. It had started to blow when the lieutenant sent for them and those who had to walk looked like Abominable Snowmen with their fur-lined hoods pulled around their faces and their hands hidden in outsize mittens.

They stood around, kicking the last of the dry snow off their big white thermo boots and wondering why the lieutenant wanted them all together at this time. He usually waited until the end of a watch if he had anything to say.

There were tractor drivers, electricians, mechanics, carpen-

ters and engineers. They could build bases, communications, airfields, roads and operate tractor trains anywhere. Without them and their skills, a big base like McMurdo would die. Especially in winter.

'I suppose you are all wondering what this is about?' said the lieutenant, making a flourish with his cigar. 'Well, I'm going to tell you. Commander Keeler came down to see me a short while ago and he said, "Lieutenant, whenever we need something bad we have to call on you and your boys and that's what I'm going to do right now."

'So I said, that's all right captain, that's what we're here for, and so he gave us a little job to do and he wants it done in the next forty-eight hours. You all want to know what it is?'

Several pairs of thermo boots rubbed at the floor as the lieutenant looked around the group. He had to be watched when he spoke in that bantering voice of his. No one wanted to catch his eye.

'Come on, you all must be curious.' Lieutenant Smith blew a smoke ring while he waited.

'Yes, I'd like to know.' It was Mulcahey, a tractor driver who almost matched the lieutenant's bulk, who spoke. 'What is this little job you have for us?'

The lieutenant told them. He was deadly serious now, and no longer made the comical movements with his cigar.

'The admiral himself is coming in on a special flight which is going to pick up Giovanni, you know, that little guy with the brain tumour, and take him out to hospital. What we've been told to do is build a skiway out there for the flight and put a flare path along it.'

'Build a skiway out there, in mid-winter, in the dark, they must be mad.' Mulcahey always spoke his mind.

'We'd be mad to try in this weather,' said a voice on the perimeter of the circle that the lieutenant could not put a face to.

'All the same we're going to and knowing you all like I do I know there's not a man who would chicken out, even if he could.' The ice broken, the lieutenant found it easier to get on and tell the men what his plans were.

He told them that they would set a skiway up five miles out on the sea ice because that would give the aircraft a chance to

manoeuvre if necessary without any fear of obstructions. 'Like hills,' he added laconically.

The ice out there would be fourteen to twenty feet thick and in itself was no problem and if the weather was reasonable, neither would be landing on it.

'When we get those flares lit and that plane puts its landing light on, the whole area will be lit up like the fourth of July.'

Jerry Lacan, the youngest tractor driver, appealed to Mulcahey in a low whisper. 'They can't be serious; men can't work out on the ice building a strip at this time of year.'

The lieutenant carried on as if he hadn't heard. 'It will be no picnic and by the look of the weather we won't be able to do much for the next twenty-four hours except get a bit of equipment down there and wait until it blows over and then get on with it.'

There was not a word from the men. 'Look,' said Smith, 'the admiral wouldn't ask us to do this if that kid didn't need to be taken out of here to get the kind of treatment he needs to pull him through.'

Mulcahey was almost ready to commit himself. 'That's the part that worries me. Whenever I get mixed up in something I've always got to think about someone else.'

'Like?' asked Smith, relighting the stump of his cigar. He knew they were coming round.

'Like every dame I ever knew. They always had me worrying more about their relations or somebody I didn't even know, but at least we do know Giovanni. But still, we get the lousiest jobs it's possible to do. There's always someone "depending" on us. Looks like we're the fall guys again.'

'There's a guy depending on you, lousy job or not.'

'You win, lieutenant,' said Mulcahey reluctantly. 'We'll build that skiway if it kills us.'

Lieutenant Smith's massive frame shook with laughter. 'You know what, it probably will.'

He watched the men depart to do the jobs that he had assigned. 'They were a queer bunch, grumbling and protesting, but he knew them well enough to sense that in their own way they were already planning to make a success of it.

That was a funny thing about men; they could never resist a challenge. The toughest work was never done for anything

but a sense of achievement.

Driving the Snowcat around the outskirts of the base on his way to the admin. building Lieutenant Smith passed a group of mechanics on their way to the tractors, which had not done much work since they finished sledging cargo from the ships moored against the ice six miles away the previous summer. Soon their roar would be joining that of the diesel power plants which never stopped throbbing.

Commander Keeler started the staff meeting as soon as the lieutenant arrived and the detailed planning for the skiway and the facilities it would need began in earnest.

In his own mind Keeler was still opposed to the idea of a winter flight but before the meeting had proceeded far he was convinced, against his will, of the feasibility of it. It was simply a matter of planning, preparation, skill and probably a little luck. Given a competent staff, he thought, any commanding officer could do almost anything.

Except for Smith, his other officers had voiced no opinion about the flight. Each was too much concerned with the details that affected him.

So far Lieutenant Smith had had the least to say and Keeler wanted the others to hear from him.

'Before we get this thing reduced simply to a matter of logistics I'd like you to hear from the lieutenant here just how his Seabees are going to build that strip,' he said.

Smith was sitting back on his seat, chomping on his cigar, his hands folded over the broad expanse of his stomach which bulged and strained at the zip of his wind-breaker.

'I'd like someone to tell me,' he joked, but a look from the commander wiped the smile from his face. He stood up apologetically.

'Basically, I guess, the problem is quite simple. That sea ice out there is pretty smooth really and seeing it's twenty feet thick it can take the weight of just about the biggest aeroplane that we've got without any trouble at all. The trouble is, though, that snow and ice get blown around a bit making the surface hummocky and we'll have to level it off. Basically, that's all.'

'And just how will you do that?' Morgan, a communications officer, wanted to know. It was his first season on the ice and

the runways had been built long before he was flown in.

'We can get it pretty level for a start by dragging a heavy chain between two bulldozers for the required length and if we strike anything that's too uneven we'll grade it off and backfill with snow and compact it. We'll have graders down there too, of course, to push the snow around and all in all we'll shift a few thousand yards of it.'

'Are there likely to be enough hummocks down there to be a problem?' Morgan persisted.

The lieutenant shrugged his shoulders. His fat face looked sad. 'You should have seen what I saw once up in Alaska. An aircraft came in there before we had an ice strip properly finished although we didn't want it to. It sure was a mess.'

He shifted an ash-tray to the edge of the table. 'Now say this was the hummock. They're hard to see on the ground and impossible from the air, and this one was poking up only about a foot. The aircraft hits it just as it's starting its touch-down and its port ski assembly fails.

'Then she bounces upwards and hits the deck again about seven hundred feet beyond the point of impact and drives the port ski seven feet into the snow and at the same time the aircraft swings sideways in a nose down attitude, tears loose the port propeller and engine and before she finally comes to a stop she is a complete wreck.'

'We don't want anything like that happening down here,' commented Commander Keeler.

'No we don't and that is why I want to have enough time to get that strip as level as a billiard table if I can,' said Smith, his demonstration with the ash-tray over.

Why hadn't he realised it before, Commander Keeler wondered. The opposition that Smith had expressed to the flight earlier hadn't anything to do with principles or feasibility or anything like that, simply that he was worried that he mightn't be given enough time to make the airstrip safe to his own satisfaction.

The lieutenant was being plied with questions but Commander Keeler was only half hearing them 'I really seem to be the only one against this mid-winter flight business,' he thought. He started to think that if the idea had come from anyone except Admiral Canaris he may have been in favour.

His thoughts started to run wild and he had to stop himself with a jerk. Common sense told him that of course the flight was dangerous but that there was also real risk involved for the men who would have to work out on the ice.

Commander Keeler felt sorry for Giovanni but he couldn't help thinking that if he should die now, all the problems would be solved. He hated himself the instant the thought came to him but there was a lingering logic about it that would not go away.

With an effort he pushed his private thoughts into the background and took control of the staff meeting once more. When it had finished Keeler was certain that every possible contingency had been provided for.

As the meeting broke up Lieutenant Smith sauntered up to the commander. 'It sure will be one heap of twisted aeroplane if it goes sliding off the runway and into the snowbanks on either side,' he said.

'What makes you say that?' Keeler asked casually, stacking his papers.

'I've been thinking since I mentioned the Alaskan crash that with the extremely low temperatures here any snow that we shift will compact, and become as hard as rock. There won't be any loose snow on the sides of the strip, just white concrete, that's all.'

'We'll just hope that your runway is so good there aren't any accidents,' said Keeler confidently.

'What will happen if the aircraft does crash here?'

'There's no doubt about that. They'll send another.'

Smith agreed. 'I think you're dead right. They'd send another even if the admiral was killed on the first one. Once something like this gets moving, nothing can stop it.'

That, Keeler decided later, was the unfortunate truth.

Mulcahey's bulldozer led the way down to the sea ice and when Commander Keeler heard the machines rumbling through the camp he put on his heavy jacket, buttoned on his fur cape and walked briskly alone down to the tide crack to see them go.

The machines clanked laboriously along Byrd Avenue, between the rows of accomodation huts, but the commander took

a short cut, walking briskly down the slopes of scoria covered with ankle-deep snow.

He had to step heavily into the snow to avoid slipping and he kept his head low to avoid the wind. Halfway there his feet felt cautiously for a small glacier and he had to scramble on all fours until he was safely across its slippery surface.

It was, the men at McMurdo said, the only glacier of urine in the world, contributed to each day by every man in the camp. Its source was the head from which it flowed through a heated pipe until it spilled out on to the hillside and instantly froze.

The glacier was marked by a sign on the far side and its obscenity made Keeler grin. He made a mental note that if ever any women came to the camp he'd have to get it taken down.

The air became colder as he got closer to the sea ice and he drew the fur cape lower over his face. A mound loomed in front of him and he decided to use it as a reviewing stand.

It was the camp rubbish dump where all the refuse and the honeybuckets from the head were tipped each day. Nothing could be more hygienic, as everything froze solid. As the dump was on sea ice it would either float out to sea in the summer or the ice would melt, tipping it into the sound. In any case there would be no trace of it left. There was no other shore station he knew of where the garbage was disposed of so efficiently with so little trouble.

As Mulcahey crossed the tide crack his lights picked up the commander on his reviewing stand and, waving a signal to those behind him, he led them closer.

Commander Keeler cupped his hands and shouted a word of encouragement as they went past but the machines drowned him out.

Mulcahey, however, understood the gesture and he raised and lowered the blade on his bulldozer in a salute. Then he turned and headed straight out on to the sound, the others following.

'You are men!' Commander Keeler impulsively shouted out after them. When they disappeared into the darkness he started to climb back towards the camp. He doubted if anyone could have a finer experience than commanding men who were men. Until winter and darkness came and drew them all together, they were only names on a list. The hardships of the next few days he felt certain would draw them together even more tightly.

It wasn't until Keeler passed through the double doors and into the warmth of the admin. building that he realised how cold he had got, and he'd only been outside twenty minutes. He stood with his hands behind his back warming himself by the oil heater.

Commander Heatherington came in just as he was getting warm. 'Would you like to come down and see young Giovanni with me? I don't like the look of things at all,' he said.

The bright lights of the sick bay and its sterilised smell receded as they entered the small room where Giovanni lay. An attendant who had been sitting beside his bed stood up.

'No change,' he said in a soft voice to the doctor.

The small dark figure rumpled the straight fold in the blankets across his chest as he turned. His eyes were closed but his lips moved as he turned his head slowly from side to side. Commander Heatherington laid one gentle hand on his forehead and felt for his pulse with the other.

Keeler watched, quietly, and then backed out of the darkened room ahead of the doctor.

'The usual symptoms with this kind of thing,' said Heatherington as he closed the door and joined Commander Keeler in the corridor. 'Severe headache, vomiting and a slow pulse rate, and as you could see for yourself, there is a big deterioration since you saw him last.'

There was no doubt in Keeler's mind. 'He's got to be got out if he is to stand any chance, hasn't he?'

Commander Heatherington looked troubled. 'You mightn't like me very much for saying this but his chances are so slim it seriously raises the question whether the flight should be attempted at all. I don't want any more patients.'

But Commander Keeler's mind was made up.

'You're not going to like me very much for saying this either, but sometimes you doctors get so blasé about death that you forget that it is people who are dying.'

'And also others who could die,' the doctor reminded him.

'We'll have to chance that but I'll tell you this. Giovanni is entitled to his chances and if I've got anything to do with it I'm going to see that he gets them. You'll excuse me now.' With that he walked out of the sick bay and straight back to the admin. building.

Heatherington watched the departing figure, the shoulders held straight back. That was a change of mind that had taken him completely by surprise. How unlike Keeler to be against the admiral one minute for wanting the flight, and supporting him the next.

He looked inside Giovanni's room. 'You call me if need be,' he instructed the sick bay attendant. 'I'll just be along in the office.'

On his way back he remembered he needed more morphine for his emergency kit. The sweetness, injured men called it, the sweetness that took away pain. It would be needed out on the ice before many more hours passed.

Eleven

THE taxi couldn't go fast enough for Rudi Sciple as it weaved in and out of the slow traffic on Memorial Avenue, the last straight run it would have before joining the rush-hour on the arterial roads which reached out from the centre of Christchurch.

He leaned forward and gave the address to the driver again. '28 Studhome Avenue. You know where it is?'

'O.K. Mac,' said the driver, 'I heard you the first time.'

Queer, thought Sciple, how so many of these New Zealanders tried to imitate the American manner of speaking when their own naturally soft voices were so pleasant to listen to.

That was another thing he liked about Jenny. She had told him more than once she didn't like the way Americans talked, it was too loud and too nasal. They didn't speak naturally, she claimed.

'Natural for us,' Sciple argued.

'But not for us,' she answered primly, and with such a lack of logic Sciple had burst out laughing.

The taxi was rolling along the banks of the Avon and Sciple calculated that he would be at the apartment in another five

minutes. Sorry, he corrected himself, flat. That was what Jenny called it.

Jenny was a secret and he had kept it well. He was certain neither the admiral nor Spengler knew about her. Some of the Christchurch newspapermen knew, but that was to be expected. They knew everything that went on in the city because where their professional curiosity left off, their own personal curiosity started.

A few of them had known about Jenny almost from the start. They were good at keeping to themselves what they thought about a man of forty-six having an affair with a girl of nineteen.

Being an American made the difference, Sciple surmised. The newspapermen especially never seemed surprised at anything Americans did, or at least they said frequently enough they weren't.

He bet they wondered about him all the same though. He met Jenny the previous October, the second week after he arrived in Christchurch at the start of the summer season. There were five months to spend in the city when he wasn't commuting to the ice with the admiral and he'd taken an apartment.

It was the ground floor of a stately old house typical of the city, and from the front windows he looked out through a frame of silver trees across the street to where the weeping willows dragged the tips of their branches in the Avon.

As soon as the taxi pulled up, Sciple leaned forward and gave the driver two dollars.

Fumbling in a small canvas bag the driver called after him 'Yer change, mate.'

'Forget it,' said Sciple. He was already striding through the front gate, travelling bag in one hand and his coat in the other. He pushed the doorbell and waited impatiently. Presently he heard the quick tapping of her heels coming up the passage

The door opened and she stood there smiling, a neat little figure, perfectly proportioned.

'Welcome home,' she said and rushed into his arms. He dropped his bag and his coat as he reached out to encircle her.

Sciple lifted her up off the doorstep but she squealed a protest. 'Rudi, you're hurting.'

Gently he put her down again. 'I'm sorry baby, but I reckon I get three times as strong when you're around.'

'I'll weaken you then.' Blushing because the implication of the remark suddenly dawned on her, she bent down and picked up the coat and bag. 'Come on in and shut the door. I don't want the whole street to see me welcoming you.'

Her heels clicked rhythmically again as she led the way. What a little doll, he thought, as he followed her. She was the best looking girl he had ever seen.

Dropping his bag at the bedroom door and hanging up the coat in the passage, Jenny led the way into the kitchen and tied a frilly apron around her waist.

She moved defensively towards the stove as he approached. 'If you want to eat later, I've got to get some of these things cooking now.'

He kept coming. 'Be good,' she implored him.'I'll only be a minute. Go into the lounge and pour me a drink.'

Sciple retreated to the lounge, knowing how determined Jenny was. Like most New Zealand girls she was a capable cook and when her pots had to be attended to they took priority over everything else.

How well she'd prepared for him. A bottle of Scotch and one of gin had been placed on a low table, with two glasses, a bottle of lemonade and a jug of ice water. He lifted the top of the ice container and found it was full of cubes just the size he liked them.

After he had poured Jenny's gin and lemonade, he added a little more gin, and then poured a hefty Scotch for himself and sank down on the sofa, glass in hand. How he wished he was married to Jenny.

Meeting her for the first time was one of the oddest experiences he had ever had. Only a week after he'd arrived in Christchurch for the first time, the Admiral had sent him to Wellington to check the arrangements with the Embassy for Congressmen who would be making the short tourist-type flights during the summer.

When Sciple found his seat for the return flight it was alongside Jenny who was looking out of the window and waving. It wasn't until the aircraft began to taxi out to the runway that she turned around and faced him.

'Good evening,' Sciple said courteously, and she smiled back warmly at him. Everything about her was so neat he observed

in the next few minutes as he sneaked glances at her. When the sign to unfasten seat-belts came on Jenny smoothed her skirt and Sciple offered her a cigarette.

'I don't smoke, thank you,' she said, 'but please don't let that stop you.' From then on they talked and in half an hour Sciple decided that she was a really pleasant kid, a fine looking girl too, well mannered, but refreshingly uninhibited.

He was the first American officer she'd ever met but her mother well remembered the days during the war when there had been thousands of American servicemen in New Zealand, and especially that they always brought flowers when they called.

Sciple was enjoying the conversation and he started Jenny talking about herself. Her father, she said, worked in the Post Office but six months ago he had been transferred to Wellington, and as she had a good job in Christchurch, and didn't want to leave, she had asked her parents to let her stay.

'My mother was against it, especially when I found a flat for myself, but they've got used to the idea now and she's been down to stay with me twice. It's not far, only an hour's flight, and I'm just coming back from a holiday up there.'

'I say,' said Sciple on impulse when he could see the lights of Christchurch in the distance and the nose of the aircraft started to dip down. 'I'm getting out a rental to have a look around Christchurch at the weekend. Now, how would you like to be my guide and show me the sights?'

'Why, I'd love to.' Jenny did not try to hide her enthusiasm.

'I'm sorry,' Sciple added, slightly embarrassed, 'but we haven't properly introduced ourselves yet. I don't even know your second name. Mine's Sciple, Rudi Sciple, a lieutenant-commander if you want to know my rank.'

Her face creased in a pleasant warm smile again. 'We have chattered on without proper introductions, haven't we? I'm Jenny Morgan, Jennifer actually, but I've always been called Jenny, and anyway I prefer it.'

That all seemed ages ago, Sciple thought as he finished his whisky and poured himself another.

'Come on, Jenny, you said you'd only be a minute,' he called.

'Coming,' she answered, and in a moment was sitting on the sofa beside him.

Her lips moved softly over his cheek and she whispered, 'Glad to be back?'

'Of course, you little minx.' Taking her glass out of her hand, he put it on the table and drew her towards him and kissed her eyes. 'As I told you on the phone, the only good thing about this flight is that I see you in July instead of September.'

'I got such a surprise when I got your cable, there hadn't been anything in the papers here about it but today they've been full of it. I heard your plane come in this morning and I wondered how long it would be before you could get here.'

Sciple held her with his arm around her shoulders. 'I thought about ringing you when we first got in, but I decided it was too late and then there was hardly a spare moment until this morning. The bastard went home to bed himself, but we all had to stay on working.'

Jenny sat forward and reached for her drink. 'Don't use language like that about the admiral,' she said primly. 'Anyway, I thought you liked him?'

'I do, baby, except when he keeps me away from you.'

'He brought you to me, this time.'

'This flight hasn't got anything to do with pleasing me, it was laid on for his own ego. You know half the staff out at the base and down on the ice think it shouldn't be made?'

'Why not, Rudi? The papers say how wonderful it is that all this is being done to save a man's life.'

He poured himself another drink. 'That's my part of the deal, to keep them saying it and not raising the questions that we might be risking a couple of dozen necks to save one. You don't know the publicity business, baby.'

'You make it all sound so . . . contrived.'

'Contrived, organised, planned, engineered, every post a winning post, that's how publicity works these days, within the Navy and out of it. Anywhere an admiral is there's a reporter, a photographer or a microphone within spitting distance, but let's not talk any more about that, baby; it's wasted five minutes already.'

'I don't want you to go on this flight, Rudi,' she said suddenly.

'I don't want to go myself, and there's just a slight chance that I won't.'

'There's what?' There was a rising note of hope in her voice. 'Oh Rudi, there isn't is there?' She was tugging at his arm and looking intently at him.

'Well, it works like this. The admiral made a rule, no man with a cold flies south. It's just about germ free down there and if anyone takes a cold down it'll spread around like wildfire. The admiral's played right along on that one and also the original ban against women. He set back a routine trip a few days last summer when he got a cold. Anyway, at the press conference this afternoon he sneezed. I'm not saying that he has a cold, but if I know him in a couple of days he could be choked up and if he is he won't go.'

'What would he do then?' Her cheek was against his sleeve and he turned around until his chin was in her hair.

'Send down the back-up plane,' he said softly. 'That's what he'd do. Once that strip is ready down there and once the weather is O.K. there'll be a plane out here and on its way.'

Jenny pressed him again. 'I heard him on the radio and the flight sounded so terribly important. Do you really think he'd pass it up? You've told me often enough he's been in everything important that goes on, and this is.'

'Nothing is important enough to make the admiral break one of his own rules. If he has a cold, he won't go.'

That decided her and she got up off the sofa and started back towards the kitchen. 'I can smell something burning,' she called as she pattered away. 'Now don't you pour yourself another drink before we eat.'

'You sound like an old married woman,' answered Sciple, reaching for the Scotch.

Movement in the kitchen stopped for a moment. 'I wish I was,' he heard her say, trying to be bright.

Goddam my careless tongue, he reproved himself, as the whisky sloshed into the glass. Me and my big mouth.

The feeling of guilt that Sciple had about Jenny came to the surface. Would he ever reconcile himself to the fact that he was a forty-six-year-old man with a nineteen-year-old mistress, he wondered?

Everything had happened at such a pace from the time Jenny accompanied him on the first sight-seeing drive around Christchurch, a day that had given him more pleasure than he'd had

for years. She directed him to parks and museums and the leafy avenues where the wealthy people lived, their fine homes amid the trees having a privacy that was denied to the workers who were congregated in rows of box-like houses beneath a tangle of telephone and power poles.

They criss-crossed the city searching for the sights that Jenny thought would impress him most and she even led him to the gates of her old school.

'I wasn't the brightest pupil they had,' she observed.

'But the prettiest, I'll bet.' She blushed and said nothing, but Sciple could see that she was pleased. Soon she was telling him about Christchurch again.

'It is a mighty fine city,' he agreed with her, 'and not unlike some of our university cities back home.'

When it began to grow dark Jenny had an idea and drove high into the Cashmere hills until they were looking down on the city.

'Just look at that,' she said excitedly, pointing to the miles of lights sparkling below, and in the distance, at the edge of the stretching plains, the long line of the snow-covered Southern Alps.

'Pretty, pretty,' Sciple told her, 'but not half so pretty as the girl sitting beside me.'

'Oh commander,' said Jenny, 'the things you Americans say.' When she eased off the handbrake and the car started to move Sciple leaned over and pulled it on again.

'Before we go there are two things I'd like you to do for me.'

'What are they?'

'Don't call me commander, call me Rudi, and have dinner with me tonight.'

'O.K. Rudi,' she laughed, trying to imitate his accent, 'you take me to dinner.'

She had to concentrate as she negotiated the sharp corners on the downward journey so Sciple sat quietly but he couldn't help thinking about his young companion. In every respect she delighted him. How wonderful it would be to lay her, he speculated. At that moment she turned and smiled. 'Had a nice day, Rudi?'

'Just the best, Jenny,' and then he said no more, trying to

banish the thought which seemed ugly compared with the girl's innocent freshness.

Jenny set the meal on the table and then clapped her hands. 'Come on, Rudi, I know you must be tired but let's eat while it's hot. And no more whisky yet,' she said firmly, as he reached out towards the bottle again.

'I was just thinking back to the day we had the first drive around Christchurch, it was a day to remember, wasn't it?'

'All days with you are days to remember, Rudi, that's because I love you.' He could never hear her say that without saying that he loved her too, as she expected of him. But he always had a conviction that his words never sounded sincere, although he earnestly wanted them to. They ate the meal in silence and then he dried the dishes while she washed.

His tiredness gone, he took her firmly by the hand. 'Come with me, angel, there are a couple of things I want to talk to you about.'

'Talk?' she giggled as he firmly shut the bedroom door. 'The girls at school used to say that when Mark Antony went to see Cleopatra he said he hadn't come to talk.'

As he took off his uniform and hung it up, Sciple eyed her hungrily. 'I haven't come to talk either, but later, maybe.'

He turned away as she started to unbutton her jacket, and raced into his pyjamas, wanting to have the luxury of seeing her undress as he lay in bed.

Jenny slipped off her shoes and, undoing the zip of her skirt, stepped out of it neatly as it slid to the floor. Sciple watched expectantly as she folded her skirt and jacket on a clothes-hanger and put them in the wardrobe.

Her stockings were off in a trice and almost in the same movement she removed her brassière and slipped on a nylon nightie. Modestly she turned off the light at the wall and then there was a rustle as she removed the last of her underclothing.

Slipping into bed she leaned across and pushed her tight young breasts against his chest. When his arms went around her and his fingers pushed into her back he surged with new life and power. Not until the rhythmic happiness was complete did he relax his hold.

While Jenny slept, his days with her passed through his mind. In the first fortnight she had found the apartment and furnished

and decorated it for him, and they were together every evening that the admiral did not keep him at the base.

The night she put the finishing touches to the decorating, he made coffee while she tacked up some pictures he had bought and the Antarctic scroll he got for a dollar like everyone who went to McMurdo Sound. Sitting down together they admired their handiwork and talked for an hour.

'I must be getting home,' Jenny then said. 'It's after twelve.'

Sciple put down his coffee cup and took both her hands in his and said impulsively. 'I don't want you to go home, Jenny, I want you to stay here, with me.'

She was startled and surprised and tried to keep calm but began to tremble. Her composure returned while he was still trying to find words.

'Every mother in Christchurch has warned her daughter about how fast Americans are, Rudi. You're being so naughty unless you are proposing to me,' she said lightly.

The laugh with which she was going to extricate herself was stillborn. He had the oddest look on his face she had ever seen. She realised he was deadly serious.

Awkwardly he got up and walked over to the window. As she waited he stood with his back to her, his hands jammed in his pockets.

'Call me an odd ball if you like,' he said presently, 'the whole thing is screwy and I've made a complete mess of everything, and I'd be the worst person in the world at saying what I feel, but the simple fact is that I love you and I want you.'

'Don't look out of that silly window,' Jenny commanded him. 'Come and sit here with me.'

When he was seated he took her hand. 'You must think I'm a nut; I feel such a goddam fool, braying at you like that.' Letting go he reached for a cigarette and rammed it between his dry lips.

Jenny reached over and took it from him and laid it on the table. 'I don't think you're a nut or anything like that, but just tell me one thing again, and please tell me honestly. Do you really love me, really and truly?'

Sciple drew her closer to him. 'I really do. I'm old enough to be your father and that's something I've thought mighty hard about the last few days, but for better or worse I had to say or

do something, and now I've said it.'

'What would you have done if you hadn't said it?' she asked him.

'In a short time, maybe a couple of days, told you that you shouldn't come around any more, that you shouldn't see me again. These things develop and there comes a time to put a stop to them.'

'You've had a lot of experience?'

'Good God, no, don't get the wrong picture. You know, like naval officers, nice uniforms moving around the world, glamour parties and endless women. It's not at all like that; it's just a job like anyone else has got and there are hundreds of us who have less to do with women than those guys marooned down there at the South Pole for a year.'

Sciple gradually returned to his jaunty self and was more assured. 'However, Jenny, when a man of my age starts knocking around with a girl like you, something is going to happen, you know how it is with older men and young girls, and that could have been fun, but the complicating factor is, I really do love you. Silly, isn't it, but I do.'

Her head bent back slightly and he kissed her on the lips. They felt very soft to him. For a moment she broke away and then she pressed against him and kissed him back. Her hand reached up behind his head and pressed him closer to her. A surge of excitement and surprise made him tremble as she let him go and rested her head on his chest.

'You really didn't have to tell me that you loved me, I knew,' she said. 'What you didn't know, my sweetheart, was that I loved you too. I have done ever since that first day we spent together.'

'Tell me more, baby, tell me again,' Sciple muttered but he found her lips again before she could reply. Later he made one final effort to level with her. 'I don't know where all this will end; I go and I come back, but if I get transferred off this operation, I may go and not come back for months, maybe, and perhaps not at all, until my commission runs out in four years.'

'Kiss me again, Rudi.' It was all she would say to him for the next hour, even when he told her about his wife from whom he had been separated for five years. The next day Jenny moved in.

Turning over on his elbow in the bed, Sciple looked at her, sleeping peacefully, her left arm lying along the quilt. On her finger was the wedding ring which she had insisted on his buying her. It gave her peace of mind. She felt married.

Even after he had settled himself again he could not go to sleep, the trip-wires of too many fresh thoughts interrupting his drowsy progress.

What a funny thing it was, all those people who had read about the flight south in the papers and were talking about it, did not know anything about the men involved, with the exception of the admiral, of course.

The men who did most of the important things in the world remained anonymous and the figureheads got all the credit.

That was his job, though, Sciple decided, a figurehead maker. No, he corrected himself, the admiral wasn't just the figure which pulled the strings to make the puppets dance, he actually got into the act himself.

He only half-heard the aeroplane approaching, a faint drumming at first and then it was overhead with its high-pitched whine, losing height rapidly as it settled towards the main runway. It was the back-up plane arriving. That was another funny thing. Aeroplanes, like babies, always came during the night. With that thought, Sciple fell asleep.

The big aeroplane came fast to the parking area and then braked, its four propellers making a golden circle of light. Lieutenant Fortrose took off his head-set and turned to his co-pilot, Lieutenant Reeves. 'That's the end of the penny section, Oliver.'

Fortrose stretched himself tiredly. 'Have you ever thought how all airports look the same?'

'Yes, but they all look good when you're down,' Reeves answered.

Fortrose agreed with that but he didn't think the youngster had quite got the point. 'What I mean by all looking the same is that you can fly just about anywhere in the world and once you're down there's just lights, concrete, more aeroplanes, and buildings with doors that never shut.'

'Well, these ones sure look good to me because on the other side of them somewhere is a hotel bed with good clean sheets

and I'm going to climb in between them and sleep for hours,' answered Reeves. 'You know that's the longest flight I ever made over water, to Honolulu, Tahiti and now down to here? Last time we came in through Fiji and Auckland.'

'You'll see a lot more water yet,' Fortrose assured him. 'Before you hit the sack you're going to come with Tom and me and we are going to find ourselves one of those big steaks they serve down here in New Zealand.'

'You can count me in on that one,' said the navigator, poking his head around the corner. 'I could eat a horse.'

'A steak,' Fortrose corrected him.

'First we've got visitors,' said Reeves, pointing to the admiral's car which was drawn up on the tarmac.

'Oh no,' Fortrose complained, 'not a goddam welcoming committee.'

The admiral shook hands with the crew as they stepped out of the aeroplane and stood smiling with them as the flash bulbs of the Press cameras popped.

'It's a big relief to have you here,' he told Fortrose. 'Everything is set up and we're now ready to go as soon as that strip's in at McMurdo.'

A tractor hooked up to the Hercules and began to tow it away.

'They'll fit the skis on tonight,' the admiral nodded after the departing aeroplane. 'If everything goes as it's planned you won't be making any landing on the ice, but we'll put those skis on just in case.'

He's enthusiastic, thought Fortrose, out here meeting us and all. The mood was contagious and he was starting to feel some stirrings of excitement himself as he listened to the admiral explain how the weather was lousy at McMurdo but that the strip was going in just fine.

'With luck we'll get away from here tomorrow night,' said Canaris, 'seven and a half hours to get down there, no more than an hour on the ice and if we pick up the tailwind that Major Heapy expects, we'll make it back in seven hours which will mean a touchdown before midday Thursday.'

'How far south will you want us to go?' Fortrose asked.

It was one detail the admiral couldn't answer. 'That's a point we'll have to talk over with Major Heapy but my guess would

be not as far as the pack ice.'

'I get the picture. Apart from the ice being too far south for us to wait around long, there wouldn't be much gas left to help if a plane went down there.'

Admiral Canaris squeezed the lieutenant's arm. 'Don't have any worry on that score, son, we'll make it back from there all right.'

The arrival of Commander Spengler ended the conversation. 'Excuse me, sir,' he said to the admiral, 'but we're getting some messages through from McMurdo. You like to have a look at them?'

'Duty calls,' the admiral told Fortrose pleasantly, taking his hand again. 'I'll see you tomorrow then. Get a good night's sleep. No night on the town now.'

Fortrose smiled weakly. 'Not after we've been in the air as long as we have.' He watched the car carry the admiral and the commander away and then walked over to his co-pilot and navigator.

'Tom's got a great idea,' Reeves gabbled at him as he approached. 'He says he knows a strip joint down town where they serve steak so you can eat and watch at the same time.'

Lieutenant Fortrose frowned his disapproval. 'You were talking about bed not so long ago and that's where you're going, after that steak at a quiet little place I know, and not a strip joint, where you'll get your mind on other things.'

Reeves was crestfallen. 'It was just an idea.'

'A bad one,' Fortrose replied authoritatively.

A car arrived to take them into town and Fortrose got in beside the driver, the other two in the back.

'Tom's a mighty fine navigator in the air,' he told them, 'but as soon as he gets on the ground all he can think of doing is navigating himself between a pair of legs.'

'But you've got to admit, skipper, there's nothing unnatural about me, they're female legs,' said Tom.

'And you a married man,' chided Fortrose.

'I'm not,' Reeves chimed in.

Fortrose chuckled but said nothing. He was thinking about Admiral Canaris. Some said that he was an unmitigated bastard who thought about no one except himself, yet there he was, out at the airport to meet them. Probably he'd left some

party to do it. There was always a party somewhere in Christchurch for officers on the staff.

He remembered the brief stop at Honolulu where a Navy officer had asked him if he were part of the Canaris circus. That's what they thought about a winter flight to the Antarctic.

Now that he'd met the admiral again that observation seemed unfair. Sure, he admitted, any flight in the dark over two thousand miles of water to a landing on frozen sea wasn't a piece of cake, but if it was well planned out, it wasn't any circus either. It was all right for the critics but they didn't seem to remember there was a sick man at the end of the flight.

Tom tapped him on the shoulder. 'What are you thinking, skipper?'

'I was just thinking that before we leave for home we will take young Oliver to that strip joint he's so interested in.'

Lieutenant Reeves didn't hear him. He was asleep.

Twelve

THE SNOWCAT gingerly felt its way across the frozen sea, its headlights peering into the darkness and making little impression on it. Mulcahey and Lacan watched it coming, stamping their thermo boots on the ice and keeping their heads low to avoid the snow on the wind.

'Let's get inside,' said Mulcahey, 'there's no sense waiting out here. He knows where we are now.'

Lacan agreed and led the way back into the insulated hut which had been sledged down from the base. Half a dozen men were sitting around a table, enjoying the pleasant heat, their jackets unbuttoned.

'Any sign yet?' one of them asked Mulcahey.

'Sure, we can see his headlights now. Another five minutes and he will be here.'

The man grumbled. 'I can't see why we can't go back to the camp to eat instead of them bringing it out here.'

Mulcahey's heavy hand slapped down on his back. 'Aren't you forgetting, pal, just how much time we'd waste going back and forth for meals?'

He looked belligerently around the hut. 'If anyone here thinks they are getting it too easy they can swap places on the bulldozers with Lacan and me.'

'Aw, come off it,' protested a tall red-haired mechanic at the far end of the table, 'we ain't criticising you and there ain't any competition for your job. We're just hungry, that's all.'

'I'll bet my bottom dollar you don't want our job,' Mulcahey boomed at him, taking a place at the table.

Who would? thought Lacan, easing himself in beside Mulcahey. They'd worked for nine hours straight on their bulldozers, dragging the heavy chain between them to level the strip. For the last four hours, with the weather getting steadily worse, he didn't think that he could stick at it any longer.

He had stood up, sat down, stretched one leg and then the other, and had even run alongside his machine at one stage. But the creeping cold started to take possession of him.

He had never realised it before but cold was something solid. At one stage he imagined that the cold was pressing down on the dozer's canopy and that it was going to cave in.

The next thing he heard was Mulcahey talking about it. 'Out there about an hour ago I feel this big jerk on the chain and what is it but Lacan getting off course and heading back to the camp, so I go across to find out what it is all about, and he tells me that he gets to thinking about the cold and decides that it is solid, just like ice, and while he's deep in thought, he doesn't look where he is going.'

The red-haired mechanic cut in. 'How long now before you get the strip level?'

'Another six hours I'd say, providing the weather doesn't get any worse.'

'It can't get any colder,' observed Lacan.

'Don't you worry about that,' Mulcahey told him, 'it will drop one degree for every knot of wind we get and if I know anything, it is really going to blow soon.'

'Yes, I wouldn't be surprised if it really does blow soon,' Lacan answered. 'I've had it in my mind for a while that it will get worse. It's been comparatively good for too long now.'

The sound of the approaching Snowcat ended any further discussion and willings hands helped carry the hot food inside and serve it.

Lieutenant Smith stood behind the men who had their heads down, eating.

'Just carry on,' his voice boomed, 'but there are one or two things I'd like to say. First of all, Captain Keeler told me just before I came out that everything is ready now at Christchurch for the flight and the admiral will be on his way down as soon as we get this strip finished. The second thing is that we don't want to be the cause of any delays because the sick man up there isn't improving any and the sooner he can be flown back to New Zealand the better it will be for him.'

The lieutenant eased his bulk past a chair and held his cup under the coffee urn. 'Another thing,' he announced, when he had their attention again, 'is that this wind we're getting is worrying the weather boys and they think it could develop into blizzard type conditions. I've talked to the captain about this and if that starts to happen we're going to get the hell out of here back to the camp.'

Mulcahey looked up enquiringly. 'Then it must be quite a blow they're expecting, sir?'

Sipping his coffee, Lieutenant Smith thought for a careful answer. 'We could miss out on a storm like this by a couple of hundred miles, but the met. boys are reading the signs and they say perhaps, but if it does come we're not going to wait out here on the ice. We'll get back to the camp, pronto.'

Now that, thought Mulcahey, was a very sensible statement. They could wait out a storm at the camp in no discomfort at all but it would be hell if they got caught on the ice, with only one shed to shelter in.

Lacan thought the same. 'If a real bad one starts up you can count on me to get the hell out of here,' he whispered to Mulcahey.

The lieutenant overheard him. 'I'll be here and I'll be deciding when we pull out, if we pull out, but if we have to, there'll be no mad rush about it because I'm not aiming that anyone gets left behind.'

The nodded assents confirmed that everyone was in agreement with that.

Lieutenant Smith walked over to Mulcahey and Lacan and put a hand on their shoulders. 'How are you two doing?' he asked.

'We ain't complaining, yet, although it has been colder than hell out there this last hour,' said Mulcahey.

'It was minus 25 back at the camp so I guess it would be at least five degrees colder out here.'

'It's always colder where you are at the moment,' grinned Mulcahey.

Smith squeezed their shoulders as he moved on. They were as good a pair of men as he had ever worked with before. How many others would have already spent nine hours sitting on a bulldozer, dragging a heavy chain over two miles of ice, up and down, chilled to the bone, without complaining.

That sort of thing sorted the good men from the bad. The good ones never complained when the going was rough although they complained as a matter of course when it was easy.

It was a pity that the admiral would probably never know that if it wasn't for Mulcahey and Lacan and the rest of the men in the hut there wouldn't be any flight.

Smith didn't blame the admiral. The Navy was just like any other big organisation, the men at the top had to work by remote control and they'd never get anything done if they went to the trouble of finding out who danced at the end of the strings they pulled.

'Hey, lieutenant, do we get a bonus for this?' called a Seabee, buttoning up as he prepared to go outside again.

'Perhaps a little party,' suggested Smith.

Mulcahey and Lacan stood up together and the big Irishman tapped his little companion on the head with his fist.

'Does the idea of a party at the successful completion of our work appeal to you, Mr. Lacan?'

'It does,' answered Lacan, looking at him without any expression on his face, going through the well rehearsed routine which, with variations, they had practised in many places. 'Yes, Mr. Mulcahey, indeed it does.'

'Then back to work, you little bastard,' said Mulcahey, giving him an affectionate shove. Lacan feigned a gesture of hopelessness and led the way out into the frozen night.

They drove their machines over the ice for half a mile to

where they had unhooked the heavy chain before they went in to eat. The chain had frozen fast to the ice and Mulcahey had to nudge it with the blade of his bulldozer to free it. Already there was a rime of frost on his whiskers which glittered in the lights.

'I don't need any thermometer to know it's colder than before we had the chow,' he observed.

Lacan thought the same but he didn't respond. He was concentrating on shackling up his end of the chain and getting back to the shelter of the canopy on his tractor.

'Don't you agree?' Mulcahey insisted.

'I agree all right and we'll both have something in common with brass monkeys if we have to stay out in this much longer, especially when we're standing still.'

They had been working half an hour when the first blast of the blizzard hit them, and then went rolling past like an ocean wave.

The other waves of wind were on them immediately, each one stronger. In a matter of seconds the howling maelstrom encircled the tractors and they were alone. Wind-driven snow rose like fog and obscured the lights behind them. Lacan looked in vain for the reassuring blaze of the base but it had gone too.

'Mulcahey,' he yelled, and as if he had heard, Mulcahey swung his bulldozer around and headed towards him. When he drew up alongside he climbed out and started to unshackle the chain that linked them.

'Leave it where it is,' Lacan protested but the wind carried his words away. He almost tripped in his haste to get down off his machine and yell the instruction in Mulcahey's ear.

The Irishman cursed him. 'You stupid little bastard, get your end off too, we'll only go half as fast dragging this thing between us.'

Lacan saw the sense of that. If he hadn't been starting to panic he would have realised it before. He fetched a spanner and got a grip on the bolt holding the chain but he couldn't shift it.

The extreme cold made it grip more tightly. His feet slipped when he put all the strength he had into a desperate pull and he fell on his face. The ice cut him and seared his face where it touched. Mulcahey shoved him aside and wrenched the bolt loose with his spanner.

'Now you follow me,' he instructed as soon as the chain was

freed. Climbing back into his own machine he began to lumber away.

Lacan pulled a lever and wheeled his machine around to follow but he was wondering how Mulcahey knew which way to go. He followed all the same and as he did he felt his confidence starting to return and his panic began to subside.

Then he realised that Mulcahey had swung off at right angles to the strip and, as it ran parallel to the base, he must now be heading directly for it.

Occasionally the bulldozers reared over a hummock of ice and descended sickeningly but they were making fast progress and Mulcahey was counting on their reaching the camp within an hour.

The others, he knew, would be there already and so would he and Lacan if they hadn't been at the far end of the strip and been delayed by having to get rid of the chain. The thought began to niggle at him that he should be nearing the landmass but he still couldn't see anything. Perhaps he had drifted in a semi-circle and was heading out towards the strip again.

The mountains on the far side of the sea ice would stop him, but they were seventy miles away. He'd be frozen stiff before he got that far. Mulcahey decided to stop for a few minutes to try and get his bearings. Perhaps Lacan could help.

The bulldozers stopped side by side and Mulcahey stepped across and into Lacan's machine. They huddled together, Lacan worried and Mulcahey trying to be confident.

'We don't know where the hell we are and how the hell are we going to know unless this blizzard stops?' Lacan thumped Mulcahey on the shoulder and peered into his face, impossibly demanding an answer.

'Will you shut your trap for a minute and listen to me. These things don't go weaving around, they just keep going straight because they're too heavy to do anything else. I'll bet anything we're close to the point, if we could only see it.'

'You don't know where we are, and I don't know but you just won't admit we're lost,' said Lacan. 'We mightn't have been heading straight in the first place and in that case we're too far north, we're out on the wide part of the sound and we're miles from land.'

'If we are,' shouted Mulcahey, 'you can soon prove it by just

turning 45 degrees and trying that direction for awhile.'

The suggestion appealed to Lacan and he got control of himself again. 'You know, that mightn't be a bad idea. Just for a change, I'll lead the way.'

As soon as Mulcahey stepped back into his own machine Lacan turned his around and moved away at an angle. Mulcahey took up a position a few yards to his right. He could see his lights better that way.

It was an effort though. The windscreen wipers couldn't swab the snow from the glass quickly enough and the wind began to howl with murderous intensity. In spite of his concentration, Mulcahey's mind began to wander. We'll be all right when the sun comes up he thought, before realising it wouldn't rise for weeks.

A tremendous gust buffeted the tractor as it slid down a hummock and for the first time Mulcahey felt frightened. He wondered if the crazy ride was getting them anywhere. It was just madness ploughing blindly over the sea ice and he'd have to stop Lacan and think it through.

The tractor began to slide again and as Mulcahey held on tightly to steady himself he saw Lacan's lights weave about for a moment. Then they disappeared.

Mulcahey felt a sick horror as he slid to a halt. Lacan must have gone through the ice, he must have.

He peered into the blizzard but there was nothing and he put his own lights off so he could see Lacan's more easily. A tractor couldn't go through because it was twenty feet thick. Even big aeroplanes landed on it.

He'd better get going and see where the hell Lacan had got to, Mulcahey decided. He switched on his lights again. A few feet ahead of him the ice moved. He knew exactly where he was.

Every summer the icebreakers came smashing their way up McMurdo Sound, followed by the cargo ships, and they broke their way right into Supply Bay, only half a mile from the camp. Nearly every summer all the ice in the sound and the bay went out to sea, but last summer had been colder and it had all stayed in.

'Oh God,' cried Mulcahey, realising what had happened. They had gone too far north when they left the strip and since they had talked they had been heading straight for Supply

Bay with its rotten broken ice that wouldn't take any weight. They wouldn't even let men walk on it, that's how bad it was.

As soon as Lacan's tractor had got on it, it had gone straight through and sunk like a stone and there were eighty fathoms of water there.

'You poor little bastard,' Mulcahey shrieked helplessly. There was nothing that he could do. Once again his lights caught a movement in the ice. It had come tightly together again, sealing Lacan in his tomb.

No one who went down into the depths of that water ever came up again. Its shocking cold killed so quickly it was almost merciful.

How long had Lacan been gone, two or three minutes? He would be dead by now.

A minute of intense grief passed before Mulcahey appreciated his own danger and cautiously he backed the tractor along the way he had come. Then he swung off in the direction he now knew the camp must lie.

Wild notions were running through his head, that he was to blame and that if he got help quickly they might be able to send a rescue party out, because there would be air trapped inside the canopy and Lacan could live for a while. The hopes died as quickly as they were conceived when Mulcahey remembered about the cold water.

A faint glow danced eerily before him in the murk and he knew he was safe.

In the admin. building Lieutenant Smith heard the tractor and looked up grinning at Commander Keeler.

'They're here, but the sons of guns are a bit late.'

'I'd have only given them a few more minutes,' said Keeler. 'We'd have had to go out then.'

'Like I told you, captain, we'd been all through the drill before and they knew what to do. They were right down at the end of the strip and they'd just come straight in. Can't say what kept them so long, though.'

'You go and find out.'

Lieutenant Smith slid off the end of the table, nettled by the order. There was no need for the captain to be so edgy.

The tractor stopped outside the admin. building and Smith stepped up on to the tracks and hauled himself aboard.

'Where the hell have you been?' he asked roughly.

Mulcahey faced him, his eyes glistening. 'Lacan's gone.'

'Gone where?'

'Through the bay ice.'

'Through the bay ice?' The lieutenant grabbed Mulcahey and shook him. 'What do you mean through the bay ice? Where is he now?'

'We got lost and when we turned around Lacan went in front and he just went straight through the ice in Supply Bay, just a few yards in front of me. He just went.' Mulcahey shook his head unbelievingly. 'He just went like that, just disappeared.'

'What in the bloody hell were you doing on the bay ice?'

'We were lost,' Mulcahey said woodenly, 'he just went, I tell you, just like that.' His head sank down on his chest and he closed his eyes.

The lieutenant put his arm around Mulcahey's shoulder and for a minute the two big men sat without saying anything. The small group which had gathered watched and wondered what was wrong. Instinctively, they stood back respectfully, like spectators at a funeral, when at last the lieutenant led Mulcahey down from the tractor and into the admin. building where the commander was waiting.

Keeler stood alongside the chair in which Mulcahey was slumped and heard the story extracted from him again by Lieutenant Smith. Keeler was curiously detached as men often are when they hear about the death of another, especially one they do not know very well.

Once he had heard an outline of the accident he was not interested in the details, except that he would take precautions to see that no one strayed on to the bay ice again.

Commander Keeler noticed how shock transformed a big, strong vital man like Mulcahey into a hulk and he felt an unreasonable impatience with him.

The thing to do was to justify Lacan's tragedy by having the airstrip completed and Giovanni evacuated as speedily as possible. That would prevent it being just a senseless mistake.

Nothing Commander Keeler was thinking, however, showed on his face, and he surprised Smith by cutting in when Mulcahey began to go over some of the details again.

'You'd better get him over to the sick bay and get the doctor

to have a look at him and then I'd like to see you.'

'How will you make out with that tractor gone?' Keeler asked Smith when he returned.

'Are you thinking about sending the men back out on that ice again, commander?' asked the lieutenant, disbelievingly.

'Just as soon as this storm is over. I want that airstrip in and the flight on just as soon as possible.'

'But, sir, you weren't very keen on the flight in the first place and now that we've lost a man, well, doesn't that, I mean like, make your hand a bit stronger when you contact the admiral.'

'For Christ's sake,' Commander Keeler retorted angrily, 'what has us losing a man in the bay ice got to do with building an airstrip? He shouldn't have been within three miles of it.'

It was almost too much effort for the lieutenant to keep his temper under control. 'Lost a good man out there,' he rasped, 'I don't want to lose another.'

'One dead man is not going to stop us building the strip and that's my last word on the subject,' said Keeler, over-riding the objection. 'We've got a living man to save, I'm not worried about one once he's dead.'

'If I may be permitted to say so, those men of mine who've got to go out on the ice are living men. I don't want any more of them dead.'

'Would anyone be dead if your organisation for getting men off the ice in a blizzard had been effective?'

'You can't do this to me; you can't blame me for that.'

'I am not blaming you, I am merely raising a question, and I am suggesting to you that with care, the airstrip will be finished without anyone getting hurt, if the right precautions are taken.

'Look,' said Keeler, more kindly, 'I can understand how you feel, losing a man like that, but there is a kid I've got to worry about who hasn't got a chance, not unless that strip is built and the plane comes in.

'So far as I am concerned he's going to get that chance and I hope that you'll agree. Never mind what I thought about it originally. So far as I am concerned now, that strip is on.'

Commander Keeler offered the lieutenant his hand. 'We'll shake on it, I know I can count on you and your men.'

Later, surrounded by his Seabees, Lieutenant Smith told them about the commander's decision.

'He must have thought that we were ready to quit. But I told him as blunt as I could that we don't give up that easy.'

The men didn't need to say much to show that they agreed.

'There's one thing about leading men,' thought the lieutenant, 'when there can't be any doubt, you never let them know that you had any.'

'Say lieutenant,' asked one of them. 'Mulcahey be going out too?'

'Just try and keep him away.'

Everyone laughed heartily.

In an oblique way, Commander Keeler's determination had reached out and taken hold of them too.

Thirteen

THE ADMIRAL awoke as soon as the telephone began to ring, not alertly, but gropingly, pulling the curtains of sleep aside. When he snapped on the reading light he had to shut his eyes again tightly for a moment. Opening them again he saw it was 4 a.m. by the bedside clock. As he reached for the phone he knew who would be ringing.

The phone had also awakened Gwen Canaris but she lay without moving, not even turning her head towards her husband. She could tell by his brief, brisk questions that it was not good news. The pyjama-clad figure beside her sat straight up in bed, issuing a series of instructions in a low voice.

How strange, that he could sit there in his pyjamas and act like an admiral, but then men could do that sort of thing. A woman would have to go and put on her uniform first. She was about to turn towards him when he put the phone down and turned the light off. Then she heard the scraping of a match as he lit a cigarette, and she continued to lie still as he smoked in the darkness. He never smoked before breakfast.

Inhaling deeply Canaris began to cough but he persevered with the cigarette. When he leaned over and stubbed out the

butt she took his arm gently.

'What is it, why are they ringing you at this hour?'

'Are you awake? I thought you were still asleep. I didn't think you heard the phone.'

He settled down beside her again. 'It's not good, there was a man killed down on the ice during the night, one of the tractor drivers building the airstrip for the flight. That was Spengler on the phone, he's sending a car out for me.'

'Oh Peter,' said Gwen, 'how terrible.' She wanted to ask him more, but she knew it was better to wait for him to explain. For a brief moment he pressed her to him and then he got out of bed and began to dress while he told her about the accident.

'Do you have to go over to the base at this hour, is there anything that you can do now?' He was fumbling at the dressing table and she put the light on.

'Yes, I must go, there are a lot of things to be decided. I can't make decisions here, but out there I'll be right in touch and they are waiting for me.'

'What sort of things have you got to decide? About that poor man?'

Canaris leaned towards the mirror as he knotted his tie. 'Not so much about him, he's gone. Once a man goes into that freezing water he's gone, finished. Probably never even get his body.

'No, I'm not worried about him because he is past worrying about but I must get over there and evaluate the whole thing. Is there a risk we'll lose more men? Maybe we should hold up the work down there, delay the flight perhaps, that sort of thing.'

Just as he finished dressing the headlights of a car flashed along the row of elms leading to the front porch and a horn blew discreetly.

Gwen Canaris lay back when she heard the car pull away and thought about her husband. The trouble was that she never got to know him properly because his duty was always intervening. When he was with her he was kind and considerate, even if a little domineering at times.

But she often had the feeling that she never knew if she was married to a husband or an admiral. There was just no barrier between his personal and his official life although he steadfastly maintained that there was.

Once, a few years before, she had complained that he had

made love to her in the thorough, competent way that a navigation officer would go about plotting a course. It was meant to be a light-hearted comment but he had taken it cruelly and he had been hurt for days.

When they were first married she was known as the captain's wife, and for three years now she had been known as the admiral's wife. She longed simply to be Mrs Canaris.

'I'm Mrs Admiral,' she thought. No matter what had happened on the ice, all it had taken was a telephone call from the base to take him quickly from her.

For a while she felt self-pity. The gold rings on his sleeve meant more to him than the gold ring on her finger. Was that the way with all of them, she wondered?

There didn't seem to be any way she could find out except by asking and an admiral's wife couldn't do that.

Canaris had long since forgotten about his wife and for the last twenty minutes he had been sitting in his office reading the reports and listening. Twice he had reprimanded Commander Spengler for giving him opinions instead of facts.

'Facts, facts, commander,' he snapped at Spengler the second time. 'I monopolise the opinions around here, just give me the facts.'

Commander Spengler's voice quavered a little. 'I think I've been over all the facts, sir, and there is not much more at this time that I can add.'

His hands gripped behind his back, the admiral walked over to the window and looked out to where the C-130s were standing. Men were still moving around them but he could see that their skis had been fitted.

'I'm wondering,' he said, 'if maybe we shouldn't call the flight off for a while.'

'Call it off?' asked the commander incredulously, 'call it off at this stage?'

'At this stage, that's what I mean, not permanently, but for a few days, to let the weather settle down. If we keep pushing them down there to get the strip in before the weather settles down we might lose another man, we might even lose two or three.'

'Look,' said the admiral earnestly, turning around, 'what are we trying to do? We're trying to pull out a sick man but it means

more than that. We're trying to prove that we can go anywhere at any time to get a man who's in trouble, the Antarctic in mid-winter included.'

'We all understand that, if I may say so, and there's not a man here or down there who doesn't,' observed Spengler.

'That's right but it's not going to prove very much if we lose half a dozen men in getting one out.'

'We've only lost one,' Spengler reminded him, 'and that was a pure accident. It could have happened to anybody.'

The admiral shook his head to show he disagreed. 'No, down there in the cold and the dark there are odds, I don't know what they are, that we'll lose men operating outside the safe confines of the base. It's one of those things that happens and I've got to try and decide somehow what the odds of us losing more are and weigh it up from there.'

'Well, I think Commander Keeler will see that they don't lose any more men on the ice; he's already indicated that much, that last message from him, for example.'

Admiral Canaris sat down heavily in his chair and swung it around so he faced Spengler. 'Just how much do you know about Antarctica?'

Spengler was on the defensive. 'Well, I'm not an expert of course, but I did spend a summer season down there.'

'A summer season means nothing,' Canaris informed him. 'You want to be down there and watch the sun go down and know you're not going to see it again for six months.

'At first you don't worry about it but then after a few weeks you want to see that sun. You stay inside and listen to the blizzards and you feel safe and then you go outside when it's calm again and it is so cold that the whole place feels tense and brittle. You feel afraid to go very far because you imagine that if you do the cold and dark will snap on you like a rat trap.'

Commander Spengler looked at the admiral in surprise. Him, thinking thoughts like that.

'Don't worry,' continued Canaris, 'that's not the half of it. You can do any mortal thing to keep men busy and occupied during the long night but it affects them. They're not the same men they were. They make mistakes they wouldn't normally make.'

'Do you think that is why those tractor drivers got lost?'

'I'm certain of it,' said the admiral. 'I know that Mulcahey, this is his second wintering over and he knows that area like the back of his hand. Normally he wouldn't need a compass or anything else to tell him where he was. Put him in a blizzard in the summer and he'd go back to the base like a homing pigeon. But he's like the rest, he's had weeks of darkness and he'll make mistakes now, which he wouldn't make before.'

A steady stare from the admiral lifted Commander Spengler's eyes up to meet his: 'That's the reason we could lose more men out on that strip, especially in bad weather.'

'The weather could clear quickly,' Spengler suggested hopefully.

'I'm hoping for that and I'm also hoping that it won't shut it just as quick again, especially if we've got an aircraft overhead there.'

'So that's it,' thought Spengler, 'he's worried about himself. He's chickening out.'

The telephone rang and the admiral answered it. 'I'll be back in a minute,' he said to Spengler as he put it down and left the room.

When he'd gone, Commander Spengler recalled every word that had been said. The admiral had certainly fooled him for a start with his careful speech about the Antarctic night and men in the dark making mistakes, but all he was really thinking about was the possibility that the aircraft he went down in could strike a sudden storm and couldn't land.

It was the first time, Commander Spengler decided, that he'd ever detected any weakness in the admiral. He was always so strong and confident, but not any more now, not so far as he was concerned.

One of these days he would let him know that he knew that he had been scared. The thought of it made him smile and he cracked his knuckles absentmindedly. When would he get the chance to do that without putting himself in the cart? But there was no need to worry about that now, the time would come.

'You took your time getting here,' said Canaris as he entered Sciple's office.

'They just let me know about twenty minutes ago,' said Sciple indignantly. 'It's the sort of thing that Spengler would do on purpose.'

'Never mind about that now.' The admiral shut the door firmly behind him. 'I came down here rather than see you in my own room because I want to talk to you for a few minutes without any interruptions.'

Big Daddy is in trouble, thought Sciple, he's speaking in that kind of voice.

'This is starting to foul up,' said the admiral, 'and it's not going to look any better if we lose any more men down there. I've mentioned it to Spengler; I may call the flight off, temporarily.'

Sciple looked at him in astonishment. 'You're putting me on.'

A heavy stare was the only reprimand but it told Sciple to shut up.

'We've got a lot going on this operation and there are a lot of people watching us.'

Sciple agreed with that. He knew, if anyone did, how much publicity there had been.

'If the Russians were doing a flight like this they'd say nothing about it until they were safely back, and if they had some accidents or even lost a plane it's unlikely that anyone would ever hear about it.'

Sciple spoke up. 'That's not the way we operate.'

'Of course it isn't,' said the admiral irritably, 'and we don't because we plan everything thoroughly and provide for every possible contingency, and if we fail that's just bad luck. But if we do something with risks in it like this and then pull it off, well then it really means something.'

'I'm getting a bit confused, admiral. I can't tell if you are for it or against it.'

'Of course I'm for it but I'm trying to weigh up what further hazards are involved. Where do we stand if we lose another half dozen or a dozen men, just to rescue one?'

'If we knew for certain that we were going to lose half a dozen men there'd be every justification for calling the whole thing off, but Washington would have to approve first.'

Admiral Canaris sat on the edge of Sciple's table. 'You know, and I know, that Washington will pass the buck to me. It's me who has got to decide what to do.'

'Yes, in the end you must decide, but so far, with only one

man dead and that, as far as I can work out, is just one of those things, is there justification right now for real doubt?'

Easing himself off the desk the admiral walked over and studied the big wall map. He tapped his index finger against Antarctica.

'That's the real trouble, Rudi. I've got a hunch we're not out of the woods yet, not by a long stretch.' His tapping continued. 'The trouble with this place is the bad weather which is always worse in the dark. If we got a storm or a whiteout just when we were due to land there, well, you know what would happen.'

Sciple started thinking of Jenny. She home in bed, he at the base, while the admiral worked his doubts out on him.

'What about that?' The sharpness of the admiral's voice returned Sciple to the conversation. With difficulty he took up the threads of it.

'The meteorologists, it's their job to talk about the weather, what does Captain Hershberger say?'

'Up to a point the met. people are good but the pilots don't trust them entirely, not on the ice,' said the admiral.

'I'm seeing Hershberger soon,' he added. 'I'm hopeful we'll get a green light from him.'

He's coming around to the point where he's just about talked out his doubts, thought Sciple, any minute now he'll be enthusiastic about the flight again.

'Admiral,' he said boldly, 'I honestly think the flight should go on and the sooner the better.'

Canaris was non-committal. 'It was very good of you to talk things over with me.' He stretched his arms tiredly and ran a hand through his greying hair.

Very good to talk things over with him, Sciple said to himself. Since when did lieutenant-commanders refuse to listen to admirals.

'What is the rest of the programme for this morning, sir?' he asked.

'I'll need you because I will be seeing the newspaper people later, nothing formal, I'll see them in my office, but I want you to work up a report for me on the events at McMurdo. You know what to do.'

'The main thing they'll be interested in is the flight, if it is still on and if so, when,' Sciple informed him.

'What do you think I'm out here doing,' Canaris answered irritably. 'I'll see Spengler again when he's got more information from McMurdo and I'll see Hershberger who'll have evaluated his weather data, and then I'll decide. I'll probably be able to tell the Press people. I'll see them at eleven, in my office.'

After the admiral had gone, Sciple sat at his desk thoughtfully. So far as he was concerned the flight would be on and it was just a matter of when. That would be as soon as the weather down south cleared, he supposed.

Only a man with determination got to be an admiral. Looking at it from that angle, why should he have thought for a minute that Canaris would call the flight off because someone had been killed? It was the last thing that he would do.

He wouldn't fly all the way out from Washington to New Zealand with such a fanfare and then sit on his ass because someone got drowned. No sir. He'd give out that he had doubts and he'd show proper concern. But he'd go.

It suddenly struck Sciple that he'd be going too. What was he doing being so detached!

Impulsively he picked up the telephone and dialled Jenny.

He lit a cigarette while the phone rang. Dammit. Why wouldn't she wake. Jenny sounded sleepy when she answered. 'Listen sugar,' he told her, 'I doubt if I'll be back today. Things are moving out here and the Big Boy will have me on the move most of the time.'

There was a rap at the door and Commander Spengler strode in, a sheaf of papers in his hand.

'I gotta go now,' Sciple told Jenny, 'see you later.'

'Checking in with that little doll of yours?' Spengler asked as Sciple hung up.

Sciple glared but said nothing.

'Aw, come on now, everyone knows there's a sweet little piece you've been screwing since October, everyone that is except the admiral,' said Spengler.

'There's one or two high-priced whores in this town who know the colour of your money, Spengler.'

The commander flushed. 'Don't you dare talk to me like that.'

Once again Sciple had control of himself. 'You just remem-

ber, I'm on the admiral's staff, not yours."

'That doesn't allow you to be insubordinate, Sciple.'

'Maybe it doesn't, but don't you try pulling rank because I've told you a home truth. You won't have a leg to stand on if I tell the admiral what precipitated it, and he knows I tell him the truth because I've never told him a lie.'

'Are you suggesting I'm a liar?'

'I'm not suggesting anything but if you think the admiral hasn't any inkling about how that car got written off when you were with one of your female friends last summer, you're mistaken. He didn't do anything about your report but he knows what the truth is. The police told him.'

Commander Spengler's lips compressed into a thin blue line. If he were carrying a gun, Sciple thought, he'd shoot me.

The commander walked up to the desk and slammed down the papers. 'These are the reports from McMurdo. I was told to give them to you.'

'Thank you,' Sciple said courteously. He was cooling down and his anger was passing.

Commander Spengler walked away quickly and closed the door behind him but then opened it again and stuck his head around it.

'By the way, should anything happen to you down on the ice, I'll look after that little bird of yours.' He smiled as he withdrew his head and slammed the door shut.

Sciple flopped into his chair. He should have remembered that Spengler's rotten tongue won all his arguments for him. He had a real talent for being a proper bastard when he got into an argument.

The thought of him even knowing Jenny, let alone getting his fat hands on her, sickened Sciple. Spengler would treat her like one of his whores and try to buy her.

He realised he must have been seen a lot with Jenny without knowing it. That didn't matter so much, what did was that they wouldn't understand that she wasn't just a cheap little tart like half of them shacked up with.

Crushing his cigarette out he burned his finger and rubbed it to ease the pain. How could any of them believe that a middle-aged officer loved a girl of nineteen and that she loved him too?

In the minds of the young officers and enlisted men, real

endearment and love was something for those under thirty. So far as he and Jenny were concerned they'd see dirt and not love. Bitterly he resented that they knew anything about her.

There was one good thing, Spengler wouldn't say any more, not to anyone, because he wouldn't want the incident of the call girl and the car brought up. What was her name? Although he tried hard, Sciple couldn't remember.

Major Heapy stood on the tarmac beneath his aircraft, his hands deep in the pockets of his leather jacket. There was a cold wind and he turned his back to it.

'You reckon we'll go?' Lieutenant McAuley asked him.

'Who says we won't?'

'They say they've been talking about it this morning and there seems a lot of doubt at present.'

'They're always talking like that, as long as I've been flying,' Heapy said sourly to his co-pilot. 'On any base where there are people with desk jobs they've just got to have a flap now and again or go crazy.'

He shrugged his shoulders to end the subject and fished in his pocket for his cigarettes. 'You done all you're supposed to do?' he asked.

'Sure, all we got to do now is get in and go, if we're going that is.'

'You listen to the scuttlebutt too much,' Heapy told McAuley, 'but you'll grow out of it. Like I said before, who said we aren't going?'

'Just about everyone I talked to this morning.'

'You got a direct line to the admiral?'

'Well, he's been out here since 4 a.m.'

'He'd have been out here at 4 a.m. if a cook down on the ice had burned his ass on the stove. That's the way he operates. He takes charge of everything.'

'So you're sure we're going?'

'This time tomorrow, son, you'll be looking at pack ice. C'mon, it's getting cold out here, let's go and get a cup of coffee.'

The major led the way to the air terminal building and through the crowded foyer into the cafeteria. They didn't say any more until they sat down at a table with their coffee.

'You do anything last night?' the major asked.

McAuley looked a bit embarrassed. 'Matter of fact I didn't. I don't know anyone much. I just went to bed and read awhile.'

'Just as well you didn't get tangled up with some of the staff. I hear they had a night on the town.'

'May I sit here, with you?' A brief-case was put on the table and a cup of tea and a plate of sandwiches beside it. A greying man of fifty with a thin moustache waited for an answer.

'Help yourself,' said Major Heapy amiably.

'You wouldn't by any chance be off one of the planes going to fly down to the ice, would you?' enquired the stranger, noting the wings on the major's jacket.

'Guess so,' said Heapy.

'Glad it's you and not me,' said the man. 'I'm flying north on business; wouldn't fly south down there for all the tea in China.'

The major smiled at him and sipped his coffee. 'It won't be that bad,' he said consolingly, 'they'll have things fixed up pretty well down there.'

'I was in the Navy during the war,' said the stranger, 'and we were up in the Arctic often enough in winter. I'd say the Antarctic would be worse. I wouldn't fancy landing down there at all.'

Major Heapy listened patiently and nodded in agreement when he thought it appropriate. McAuley resented the intrusion and the gloomy predictions about the Antarctic weather the stranger was making. He felt inclined to put his spoke in when the public address system gave a flight announcement.

'That's mine,' said the stranger, banging down his cup and picking up his brief-case. He began to rush away and then paused. 'Good luck,' he cried over his shoulder, and hurried out into the foyer.

'Why'd you let him go rambling on like that? Why didn't you tell him to button his lip?' McAuley was put out.

'Come on, he was just being right friendly,' Heapy answered. He put on his cap and stood up. 'Let me tell you that all these New Zealanders are right friendly folk and we haven't got a base anywhere in the world where we're more welcome.'

'Well, in the short time I've been here I'd go along with that,' McAuley grudgingly admitted. 'I suppose with the flight coming up I'm a bit edgy.'

'You haven't got that on your own.'

'I never thought I'd hear you say that. Hell, all the way out I was thinking about you, sitting there as calm as Buddha, as if you were on a scheduled flight.'

'Let's get going.' Major Heapy led the way out of the cafeteria on to the hard stand and began to walk back towards his aeroplane. McAuley fell into step beside him.

'Let me tell you something,' said Major Heapy. 'Everyone who flies in aeroplanes depends on the pilots. Get passengers off the ground and God and the pilots rank equal. When you've got people depending on you like that and you've got any doubts you don't run around showing them, O.K.?'

It was quite a speech for the major and he indicated that there was nothing more to say.

He was right, McAuley knew that. Even when there were risks pilots should say nothing or do nothing that would let anyone else know they were worrying.

Heapy inspected the ski fittings again. 'I had trouble with these once before so we'll take her up this morning and check and after that we'll rest up a little. Tomorrow will be a long day.'

Lieutenant Fortrose ambled up and joined them. 'You all set, Hank?' Heapy asked.

'Sure am,' he replied casually, 'but I hear that there's some doubts going on in someone's mind. What if they called the whole thing off and told us to go home?'

Heapy looked at him sharply and then noticed the twinkling eyes. 'You could go home, not that you're needed even now,' he said sarcastically.

'That's what I've been telling myself, but here we are.'

'You checked on the weather at McMurdo?'

'I was at communications just before I came out here. Seems like it's pretty foul right now. Apparently they started work out on the ice again but the weather packed up not long ago. It's really blowing this time.'

'Mmm. Not too good.' Major Heapy was thoughtful. 'Still, it can clear there as quickly as it can blow up.'

'That's what Captain Hershberger says and I know that too from last year. Tell you what, though,' Fortrose added, 'I'm

glad it's not me who's working out on the ice levelling that strip.'

Heapy agreed. 'I couldn't think of anything worse. We've got the easy end of the stick when you think of them.'

'I came out here looking for Reeves,' said Fortrose, 'he was with me one minute and gone the next. He'll be where there are some good looking dames, that's for sure.'

'Try looking over in the air terminal buildings, there are some grade A ones there,' suggested McAuley.

'I'll do just that,' said Fortrose strolling off. 'See you around.'

'There's a casual, carefree guy,' said McAuley when Fortrose was out of earshot.

'Don't let him fool you too much,' advised Major Heapy, 'he's as tough and competent as hell behind that easy smile of his. He can come up with the goods otherwise he wouldn't be out here on this job. None of us would.'

He climbed up into the aircraft, McAuley followed obediently. Back to business, he thought.

Fourteen

SOMETIMES the wind howled so loudly that Commander Heatherington had to raise his voice, but most of the time he had been quietly urging Commander Keeler to change his mind. For the last hour he had been coming back to the same point all the time, asking the admiral to call the deal off.

'It's the only sensible thing to do, John,' he said. There were only the two of them in Keeler's small office and they faced each other across the desk.

His mind made up, Commander Keeler was losing his patience. 'Listen, in the first place you have no right to come in here and try and influence me, and for the last time I'm telling you that as soon as the weather clears we're going out and we're going to finish that strip. Now that's final.'

The doctor was also getting annoyed. 'That's real noble of

you, get the aircraft in to take Giovanni out, regardless of the cost.'

'You should be the one giving me the most support. You're the doctor aren't you, the one supposed to be dedicated to saving lives?'

'As a doctor, let me tell you that Giovanni's chances of lasting more than a few days are already very slim.'

'That's put about as callously as possible, just another patient you didn't save, is that it?'

Commander Heatherington fought to keep control of himself but his temper conquered his resolve.

'It's a pity you don't have to face facts like doctors do instead of talking a lot of crap. I tell you a man's dying and you simper around saying, "Oh no, doctor, he can't die because I don't want him to".'

Commander Heatherington smacked a fist down on to the table. 'Well let me tell you whether you want him to or not, this man is going to die, do you hear me, he's going to die. I'm not writing him off, I'm just stating the facts and if you are going to run more risks building an airfield and getting an aeroplane down here, all for a man who is dying, then I say you are guilty of criminal stupidity.'

Ashen-faced, Commander Keeler sat upright in his chair. His outburst over, Heatherington slumped back on to his.

'I'll go now,' he said. It was a very long time since he had lost his temper like that and he felt spent. He also felt guilty that he had used his position as a doctor to talk to the commander in a way no other person at the base would dare.

'No, don't go for a minute, there are just a couple of things I want to say,' said Keeler. The fire had also gone out of him although his voice trembled a little.

'First of all, I was against the admiral's plan and as you well know I tried to get him to change his mind. Then I changed mine because I realised that Giovanni, under my command, is my responsibility, but more than that, he is entitled to every privilege that an officer can offer his men and there is none more important than the chance to stay alive.'

Keeler paused while the doctor lifted his head and met his eye. 'I've realised that it is doubly important to me, that a man in my command who is sick and helpless and who can do

nothing to save himself, should have that chance to survive and I'm going to do everything in my power to see that he gets it.'

Heatherington started to rise from his chair, but the commander waved him back. 'Just hear me out on this. I know that you are right when you say that there are great risks for the men working out on the ice and the ones who will fly down here, but they're fully conscious of them and they can look after themselves. I don't need to tell you that Giovanni can't.'

'You don't need to tell me anything,' said Heatherington. 'I was just getting up before to tell you that. I've always admired you, Keeler, and regarded you as a friend, but no more so than I do now. Perhaps you're right and I'm wrong.'

'That's a pretty big thing to say.' Commander Keeler held out his hand and the doctor shook it warmly.

'Tell me one thing, though,' said Heatherington, 'how are you going to convince the admiral to persevere? You said yourself Christchurch had indicated he was thinking of calling it off.'

'He won't call it off because he just isn't that sort of man. He's one of those you strike now and again who, no matter what he says, or how he acts, will carry on and do what he intended originally. You'll see.'

'Perhaps so, but how are you going to get the men here to go along with you?'

For the first time that day Commander Keeler laughed. 'You know Heatherington, you know a lot about people's bodies but sometimes I think you don't know a great deal about people themselves.'

'C'mon now,' said the doctor, relieved that the conversation had taken a lighter turn, 'you've been rough enough on the medical profession for one day, haven't you?'

Commander Keeler laughed again. 'What I mean to say is that the men will pitch in without any urging from me. I saw this happen so often during the war. When something came up that required a special effort it wasn't necessary to ask the men for it, they just knew. I'll go over there soon and say to them as soon as the weather improves we'll go out and finish the job we started and I'll guarantee there will be no holding them back.'

'Tell you what,' said the doctor. 'I'll go out there with them.'

'It won't be necessary for you to do that, and any rate you'll be needed here, there's Giovanni, remember?'

'Let me tell you that I'm the doctor. Quite seriously though,' he added, 'there is nothing I can do for that little chap that the sick bay attendants can't do, and I could be needed out on the ice. Accidents are liable to happen out there and someone may want help fast. I don't mind going out until the worst is over.'

'O.K. then, as you say, you're the doctor.'

The enmity between the two men had entirely disappeared and they both felt happy.

'What about a drink before chow?' suggested Keeler.

'Now you're talking. It's something to be thankful for that you can have a drink on a Navy shore station,' said Heatherington.

Keeler looked at him thoughtfully. 'I've often wondered why we shouldn't have liquor on our ships like the British but the funny thing is that I think that if a vote was taken the Navy would still stay dry.'

'Hell, they're hypocritical enough about it,' said Heatherington.

'I'd agree with that. Look at the summer time when the ships come into the sound and they lower the beer on to the ice for a party. Makes it sorta legal somehow when it's drunk on the ice and not on board.'

They were getting on to an entirely different subject which Commander Heatherington thought was a good way for his session with Keeler to end. Some of the bitterness of what had been said before remained but the fact that they were drifting on to conversation in general lines marked the return to their normal easy relationship.

When the doctor refused a third drink, Commander Keeler got his heavy jacket off a peg, zipped it up to his neck and pulled the fur-lined hood over his head. 'I'm going over to see Smith and his men, but I'll look in on Giovanni with you first.'

'If I were you I'd get Smith to come over here and see me.'

'I don't doubt you're a mighty fine doctor but I still think I could teach you a thing or two about handling men. Sure I could get Smith over here but I'll bet that right at this minute he's with his men and to walk in on them and have a talk about what I expect them to do will work more wonders than order-

ing them to do anything.'

It was the doctor's turn to laugh. 'I remember you telling me once that while I was in med. school learning doctoring, you were on a ship learning to handle men. I won't argue with you on that one but you'll have to promise not to argue with me about medicine.'

'Agreed,' said Keeler cheerily. 'Lead the way.'

Halfway along the corridor Commander Heatherington stopped and turned around to Keeler. 'Just a thought, if Giovanni is asleep we won't disturb him. Remember last time you weren't content until he opened his eyes and the shape he's in at present, that wouldn't do him much good.'

Commander Keeler was quite content. 'You're the doctor, lead the way,' he commanded.

There were sixteen of them grouped around the big oil stove, the best of Smith's Seabees, assembled for their private inquest into the accident. They had just about talked themselves out and Lieutenant Smith was briefing them for the dangerous days ahead.

'Now we're going to watch it more carefully this time because the weather is going to be twice as bad, and remember what I said, if we have to leave the ice, we'll go back in a convoy this time, no matter what.'

'Lieutenant,' asked a driver, 'how are you going to make certain we're all there to go back in convoy?'

'Because there's going to be three Snowcats with radios in them at intervals along the strip. If they're told to come in they'll bring to the central point those they're detailed to keep an eye on. Weren't you listening when I was saying all this before.

'If you guys don't keep your ears open, later on you'll freeze to death out there surer than hell and you'll only have yourselves to blame.'

Lieutenant Smith rammed a new cigar into his mouth and went for a walk around the stove, passing every man. 'None of you would be down here in the first place if you weren't volunteers and I can also tell you this, none of you would be working for me if you weren't any damn good. But remember the sort of job we're doing and the weather we're doing it in is making

things twice as tough as normal. We can't afford to bugger around.'

Commander Keeler came in through the door and all the men stood up. He waved them back to their seats and took his place alongside the lieutenant with his back to the stove.

'I don't want to hold you up long,' said Keeler, 'but just to say to you that without the part you are going to play, there would be no chance at all of getting a sick man out of here. I think I know how all of you feel and it's worse when a man just disappears through the ice like that and is gone, for ever, but we have to carry on, and we must carry on, and quickly too. Time is running short.'

Keeler began moving confidently around the circle as he spoke, the lieutenant following him.

'I've said earlier today, and it's perfectly true, with the calibre of men I've got here I wouldn't exchange a command anywhere. You've done a great job so far but I warn you that in the next couple of days you'll work harder and be colder than you've ever been before.

'Some of you may have heard some rumours that there is a possibility that the flight will be called off but let me tell you that the very opposite recommendation has gone up from here.'

A couple of men clapped their giant muffs together.

'Attaboy,' said one.

'I don't want to sound dramatic but you've all heard the stories of great deeds done down here. Well this is your chance to get in on the deal.

'I'd say that you've got the best cold weather gear in the world but it takes more than gear to work outside in this kind of weather. It takes a lot of guts. You build that airstrip on schedule and you'll have done something that will be remembered down here for a long time.'

They're with me, thought Commander Keeler, right to a man. He could afford to joke. 'If you don't get it built on time then I'll let you all have the pleasure of wintering over another season.'

When he had finished the men crowded around him, pledging to give everything they'd got.

'All right,' said Lieutenant Smith, when Keeler had gone, 'we'll get down to business again.'

'Has anyone got any more questions?'

'How much is that wind gonna drop before we're going out again?' one of the drivers asked.

'We'll move out when it gets down round about twenty knots. There's plenty of work we can do if it doesn't blow much harder than that.'

'What's the score about landing lights?' was another question.

'That'll be no sweat. We'll get oil drums cut in half and spread them out along the strip about fifty yards apart and we'll put a mixture of aviation spirit and oil in them. Then when the aircraft starts to get close we'll run along a Snowcat to set them alight. Believe me, the strip will be lit up like a birthday cake. If we've got enough drums we can even move them a bit closer together.'

The questions and answers continued until Smith knew that everyone understood exactly what he had to do.

'My guess is that the wind's starting to settle down,' he said 'We can probably be out there again after supper.'

Throughout the session Mulcahey had said nothing, being lost in his own thoughts. 'I wonder how we'll feel when we go out this time?' he asked.

'I'll tell you,' said the lieutenant vigorously, 'you'll feel proud that it's you who's going out and you'll feel sorry for those who are staying behind. I've never known a guy yet who was going to do something worth while who didn't feel sorry for those who weren't joining in.'

That made sense to Mulcahey. They could say what they liked about 'Porky' Smith, but he usually knew what he was talking about.

'Who's going to be the other tractor driver on the chain with me?' Mulcahey asked the lieutenant.

'Lynsky.'

'I thought it might be him, he's almost as good a driver as Lacan was.'

'I don't want anything happening to either you or Lynsky,' warned the lieutenant, 'because we just haven't got time to train anyone else, so watch it out there.'

When Smith finally left them and went back to his office some of the men drifted back to their sleeping quarters but the

rest gathered around the workshop stove. Lynsky turned the heat up to maximum.

'We might as well have as much heat as we can get at present, we'll get sweet Fanny Adams later,' he announced.

Mulcahey eyed him appraisingly. 'I don't know how long you'll stand it out there, being skin and bone like you are. You can't beat having a bit of fat on the frame when it comes to the cold.'

'You won't be so happy with your fat when you get beaten to the dames in Christchurch,' said Lynsky.

'You won't beat me to any dames, Lynsky, and what's more I can get it without paying for it.'

'You didn't last time.'

'That was different because we didn't have much time. We only had a few hours before we caught the plane. Anyway, the paying part was Lacan's idea and yours.'

Lynsky started to laugh but stopped: 'With Jerry dead now, it doesn't seem right to joke about that night.'

'Talking about the things Lacan done won't bother him now,' said Mulcahey cynically.

Lynsky protested. 'It's not exactly that, but we shouldn't laugh about it.'

'We won't be laughing soon anyway, you and me, out on that ice. Have you dragged a chain before, out there?'

'I haven't,' said Lynsky, 'tell me about it, no kidding, if we're going to work together you've got to tell me all you can.'

'It's nothing so long as the weather stays O.K. and doing it in the spring or summer when there's daylight is nothing either, but unless we both stay together and get that chain set right we'll leave hummocks behind, which is kinda dangerous.'

Lynsky interrupted. 'It's queer when you think about it, levelling a couple of miles of ice with a chain dragged between two tractors. There must be an easier way.'

Mulcahey flexed his shoulders, enjoying the heat from the stove on his back. 'If you think of it, let the lieutenant know. He'll appreciate a man who's smarter than the best Army engineers they've had down here.'

'Cut the crap,' said Lynsky. 'If we're to be buddies out on the ice we might as well be here too.'

'Aw, forget it,' answered Mulcahey, 'there's no need to get

serious. We'll get along all right. We've got to. It's a terrible lonely feeling out there in the dark and you'll find like I did at first that you'll be glad there's a chain linking you to me. You won't feel so cut off.'

Mulcahey thought how like Lacan Lynsky was, short and dark but with finer features.

'I know about that cut-off feeling, I got it last summer when we were hauling the sledges up from the ship. Halfway up first time I got the feeling there wasn't another living soul for a thousand miles.'

'That was nothing,' said Mulcahey, 'that was in daylight. This time you'll be in the dark.'

Lynsky nodded. 'I had the idea when I first came down that the ships came right in here; I didn't realise that they wouldn't let them come right up in the spring and that we'd have to go down and haul all that stuff up on sledges.'

'You know the reason for it?' asked Mulcahey.

'Sure, they wouldn't let the icebreakers come right up because they'd free the ice the planes were landing on and the whole lot would drift out to sea.'

'That's right. I made a Joe Hunt of myself by asking the lieutenant why not wait until the ice did drift out before bringing the ships in, 'cause it usually does drift out each January, and he said to me, "how were the planes going to fly the cargo out to the other bases if it wasn't here yet; and how were they gonna operate if there was no sea ice to land on?" '

Lynsky was warming towards the big man. He'd thought that after Lacan's death Mulcahey would be impossible to get along with but here he was thawing out fast.

'Come on up to my hut, I've got something there I want to show you.'

Mulcahey was reluctant but Lynsky persisted. 'Come on,' he urged, tugging his arm, 'you'll like this.'

They stepped outside into the wind. Snow was falling heavily and the wind was sweeping it along the road and piling it around the buildings.

The cold cut through their trousers and before they had gone fifty yards their knees started becoming stiff.

'Straight from the Pole,' said Lynsky, when they reached the

shelter of his hut's porch. 'I should have had my windproof leggings on.'

Mulcahey kicked the snow off his boots and brushed it from his jacket. 'That wind's gone down a lot though, it won't last much longer now.'

Lynsky was relieved to find that there was no one else in the small lounge at the end of the hut, or in the main part where there were twelve bunks. He beckoned to Mulcahey to follow him to his bunk, at the far end.

Rummaging in a suit-case he withdrew a bottle swathed in an old singlet and handed it to Mulcahey. 'I've been saving this for a special occasion and that'll be when the airstrip is finished.'

Mulcahey looked at the bottle admiringly. 'The best black label Scotch in the world.'

'Don't tell anyone I've got it.' Lynsky retrieved the bottle and stowed it in the suit-case again.

Mulcahey tweaked Lynsky's shoulder. 'You know what would happen if you got caught with that?'

'Sure I do. Only beer for enlisted men. No hard stuff.'

'What did you take the risk of bringing it down for?'

'I didn't bring it down.' Lynsky sat down on his bunk. 'It wasn't me at all, it was Lacan who did. He had the feeling that there'd be some special occasion that'd call for a bottle of Scotch but he didn't want you to know about it because he figured that you'd invent some occasion and the bottle wouldn't last long then. He gave it to me to keep for him. Some of the others knew he had it. It was as safe as a church with me.'

Mulcahey walked back to the end of the hut and parked near the oil heater. 'You know,' he said, 'I've never been a great one for working all this business out but there must be some sort of wheel turning that put Lacan through that ice and kept me out of it. I wonder what he did that he's not here to celebrate, and I am, with his bottle.'

'You believe in fate?' Lynsky asked.

'You'll believe in it, come this time tomorrow, out there on the ice, in the dark. But it's only fate when it happens to someone else. When it happens to you it's just shitty bad luck.'

Although the storm still raged, inside the buildings, where the men were, life continued snug and secure. The oil burners

had been turned up to maximum heat and when the air became dry cans of snow were set on them to provide some humidity.

Occasionally a vicious gust rattled the thin iron chimneys or shook free a loose door which banged annoyingly before being secured again.

When the weather was calm, even though the temperature was below zero, the winter was no worse than many of them had often experienced at home. The storms, however, brought a danger to the Antarctic night.

To stray away from the base and into the gloom behind the friendly lights meant almost certain death. The wind would sap a man's strength until at last he lay down thankfully on the ice. Most likely he would imagine that he was lying down to regain his strength and when he ceased to struggle, he would feel content.

Death in the heat was painful. Death in the cold was quicker, a soothing embrace that was always welcome. That was the way most died on the ice. In the end they lay down.

But inside the oblong perimeter of boundary lights at McMurdo there were the buildings which gave shelter, warmth and food. There men waited for the storm to pass, unworried by it. There was only the occasional discomfort of having to go from one hut to another.

The old hands especially enjoyed the orchestral majesty of the storms, which ranged from the drumming of thunder to the singing of the network of stretching aerials. When the lightning flashed like a conductor's baton, the thunder boomed out and as it rolled away the staccato pinging of the braced wires took over.

The winter symphony was what Commander Heatherington called it. He wondered if such storms had inspired Wagner's Ride of the Valkyries.

The day's work done he was sitting in his quarters, toying with a drink in his hand. Normally he wouldn't drink alone but he'd got tired of waiting for Commander Keeler. There was nothing else for him to do for a few minutes except listen and use his imagination. He raised his glass and brought it down as the thunder boomed.

Commander Keeler entered the room just as Heatherington brought his glass down. 'What's this in aid of?' he asked.

'Not very much.' The doctor looked rather sheepish. 'If you must know, I was keeping in time with the thunder.'

Keeler chuckled. 'You'll be conducting the storm from the top of Observation Hill next. I'll tell you this, your arm would be sore before you finished.'

'And my ass cold, no doubt,' said Heatherington. 'Have a drink.'

Keeler raised the subject. 'I'm sorry for the way I spoke to you earlier, I guess things got a bit heated.'

The doctor set his drink down on the low table. 'There's nothing for you to apologise about, John, and I feel rather foolish arguing with you the way I did. By God, it's a funny state of affairs when doctors have to be reminded of their responsibilities to their patients.'

Keeler corrected him. 'That's over-simplifying things, Doc. I don't think that you forgot about your patient, it was just that you didn't want a lot of other people risking their necks to save him.'

'That's about the total of it,' Heatherington agreed.

'Well, I'm right with the admiral on this one now,' said Keeler, 'he's got to have his chance to live and we're going to give it to him. All the men here are right behind this, you know. They'll get out on that ice and finish the strip just as soon as they can and I don't think that will be too long. You've been listening. Noticed how the wind's dropping?'

'You know what thought crossed my mind this morning while we were arguing?'

'Tell me,' Keeler grinned at him, holding out his glass to be refilled.

'I was thinking that I could put everything back to normal with no worries and nobody having to risk anything by simply giving Giovanni a needle that would just send him drifting off, without a murmur and without any pain.'

The statement, spoken so mildly, provoked an instant response from Keeler.

'What you're saying is that you'd murder him.'

'Not that, John, don't put it like that.' The doctor went on pouring the drinks. 'In history the noblest heroes are always those who sacrificed themselves to save the others. Just imagine Giovanni as a hero, that's all.'

'With one big difference. He wouldn't be sacrificing himself; he'd be the victim of a sacrifice. Goddamit. Say what you like, it'd be murder.'

The doctor turned around smiling. 'I'm only telling you a thought that crossed my mind. There's nothing to get worked up about.'

Heatherington's generous and disarming smile relaxed Commander Keeler and eventually he smiled, too. 'Look here Paul, I'm sorry, I'm a bit edgy, you understand?'

'Of course. I think we all are. You can't build airfields in the middle of the Antarctic night, have a man go through the ice and get drowned and fly planes down here without everyone getting stirred up. That's why the thought crossed my mind, just the easy way out, really.'

'I'm glad it was only a thought.'

'Hold on a minute,' Heatherington chided him. 'There are plenty of precedents for a doctor trying to relieve a patient's pain with an injection, which unfortunately proved too strong. Nobody ever said murder them.'

The trend of the conversation was displeasing Keeler. 'What say we drop the subject? I came over for a social drink and where are we getting to? Don't go destroying my faith in doctors.'

'I've had another thought while we've been talking,' said Heatherington.

'What's that?'

'What would you ever think if Giovanni died naturally now?'

'I'd know that you didn't kill him, you're not that sort of quack.'

'You're right, just as you're stuck with seeing he gets evacuated and I can understand that. Everyone round here pins their faith on you; as a commander you'd be finished if they thought you deliberately let a man die, even to protect their own skins.'

'You'll do me, Doc,' said Commander Keeler warmly, 'you do understand.'

'Isn't that what doctors are for?' asked Heatherington mildly. 'Here, let me get you another drink.'

'You know, John,' said Heatherington as he fixed the drinks, 'you're rather a special kind of man. It's not hard to understand

why the men would do anything for you.'

'You're a bit hasty with your diagnosis,' said Keeler, 'there's something I've been meaning to tell you and now seems as good a time as any. You said earlier that the next time the men went down on the ice, you'd go with them.'

Heatherington handed the commander his drink and sat down. He could tell by the tone of voice that it was the professional sailor speaking.

'Well,' continued Commander Keeler, 'tomorrow is going to be a long day. I'm sending the men down to the ice at seven o'clock. Regardless.'

Heatherington slumped back in his chair, his fingers drumming on the glass which he was holding between his knees.

'I'm counting on an improvement in the weather,' continued Keeler, 'but even without it there's work that can be done on the ice to speed things up and there is no time to lose. The aircraft is ready to come south.'

'All right,' Heatherington said resignedly. 'I just hope you know what you're doing.'

'I've got to take a chance on the weather. I could hold off building that strip so long that it'd never get done.'

'There will be frost-bitten noses, cheeks and hands.'

The telephone rang and Heatherington picked it up. 'Yes,' he answered.

It was the sick bay. A cook had scalded his hand. Heatherington excused himself and went to attend to the injury. It'd be the same the world over, he thought, no matter where the crisis was, the ordinary things of life went on just the same.

Fifteen

THE ADMIRAL was getting annoyed at some of the questions the reporters were asking. He denied that the whole rescue mission had come close to being called off, and he insisted that all that had been going on was a reappraisal, which was con-

stantly being done with any operation.

He also emphasised that his decision, made a short time before, not to permit any flights for forty-eight hours, was based solely on weather conditions.

He had Captain Hershberger explain that there would be head winds up to sixty miles an hour on the flight south and that the storm was still making McMurdo Sound inoperative.

'All these delays are killing this story,' sighed Nigel McPherson, as he put his notebook away.

'You don't think this is being staged for the benefit of newspapers, do you?' the admiral asked crossly.

McPherson bit back. 'Americans always make a song and dance about what they're going to do and when they don't do it, well . . . ' He shrugged his shoulders.

'We at least say what we're going to do before hand,' said Commander Sciple, 'not like the Ruskies who never say anything in case it doesn't come off, as it often doesn't.'

'Thank you, Rudi,' said Admiral Canaris, effusively. He was smiling again now, 'but I don't know that we want to bring international relations into it. We can't help the weather,' he said earnestly to McPherson, 'even if it is upsetting your story. You'll eventually have a good one to tell.'

The meeting was restored to good humour again.

'What's going on at McMurdo right now?' asked another reporter, whose name the admiral didn't know.

'There's still a storm going on, of course, but it's easing and in the early hours of the morning they're going to try and get their equipment back on the ice and take some other gear there. They hope to be working again tomorrow.'

'This report about the very high winds, did it come from Hallett?' asked McPherson, revealing his knowledge of the area.

The admiral nodded at Captain Hershberger. 'Yes,' said the meteorologist, 'as you know, Cape Hallett is the first Antarctic landfall flying south and there's a wintering-over party there. They're very good and very reliable men. It would amount to suicide flying down without their sayso.'

The questions and answers went on but the reporters knew they had all they were going to get.

'When will we see you again?' asked McPherson, as the meeting started to break up. 'It's Saturday now and you won't

be flying for forty-eight hours, Monday morning then?'

'We could leave late Sunday night or early Monday, depending on the weather,' answered the admiral. 'You check through Sciple, he'll keep you posted.'

'Still adamant, no reporters on the flight?'

''Fraid not,' said the admiral, 'not this time.'

Alone again in his office with Sciple, Canaris unbuttoned his jacket and sprawled back in his chair. 'There are some days I don't like and this is one of them.'

'There was a lot of talk around here this morning that you were going to call the whole thing off,' said Sciple. 'Those reporters must have heard sound of it.'

'And what did you think?'

'Well, there is the question of risking a lot of men to get one out but I couldn't see you going this far and turning back.'

'Of course you couldn't,' said Canaris. 'Anyway, the people most directly involved, the men at McMurdo, and the aircrews, wouldn't want to stop now. They won't have even thought about it.'

'Perhaps,' said Sciple, 'but apparently the way you spoke earlier this morning, after the bad news came through, some people got the impression that you were having second thoughts.'

Admiral Canaris looked at him sharply. 'What did I say?'

'I don't know if it was what you said so much, as the general impression created. Commander Spengler for one seemed to think the whole deal was getting close to being aborted.'

Sciple couldn't resist bringing in Spengler's name. That'll teach the bastard, he thought.

Canaris dismissed the whole matter with a wave of his hand. 'Let anyone think what they like, but while I'm running this outfit, all I want them to do is what they're told.'

'Ask Heapy and Fortrose to come along and see me,' ordered the admiral, 'they're key men so I want to keep them right in the picture. And after that, you're going to come out with me, to lunch.'

That was a surprise for Commander Sciple. He couldn't remember the last time the admiral had asked him to lunch.

It proved to be a pleasant and enlightening experience. The admiral had heard about the restaurant, a small one off the city

square, and was experimenting, trying it out before taking his wife there, and he was at his talkative, amusing best.

When he really wanted to use his personality and entertain and amuse, it was dangerously easy for Sciple to forget he was an admiral and start treating him like a boon companion.

'How did I get into the Navy?' said the admiral, in response to a question Sciple had long wanted to ask. 'Well, it's not too hard to answer that but why do you want to know?' he asked suspiciously.

'I've typed out your career so often that I almost know it backwards, but I've often been curious about what happened before then. You always had an ambition about the Navy?'

'It wasn't an ambition to get in the Navy so much as an ambition to leave home.'

'I'm sorry,' mumbled Sciple. 'I didn't mean to pry into your private life.'

'You're not going to find anything sordid in it, if that's what you're thinking, not even one skeleton in the family cupboard to rattle, no, far from it. I lived in a small town as a boy and when you live in a small town you realise one day that you've got to make a decision; get out or live there forever maybe. You know why there are people living in goddam awful little places all over? They never made any decision to get out when they were young. They're stuck there.'

The admiral was thinking a long way back. 'Nothing ever happened, everything went on the same. By the time you were twenty you'd know whom you were going to marry, where you were going to live and in what part of the cemetery you'd be buried. So I got out. My father's brother was in the Navy and he paved the way for me.'

'What do you think would have happened if you'd stayed there?'

'Probably I'd have owned something, a store or a business of some kind, and learned to be content in a little world.'

'Admiral,' said Sciple, 'I can't stand Smallsville myself.'

'It's not that I can't stand it so much, but if you start thinking young enough you must get out, and do. Once you've been outside you never go back.'

The admiral sipped his iced water. 'Correct that, you don't go back permanently. The occasional visit for a start, but

they get fewer as the years pass.'

Sciple was fascinated. The local boy had made good and couldn't stand the hicks any longer.

'My brother is still there,' said Canaris. 'He wrote me on his thirtieth birthday. It was a big day for him; he'd just been elected president of the Rotary Club. You know what I was doing on my thirtieth birthday?'

'No, but I'd like to,' said Sciple.

'I was in an aeroplane flying across a part of Antarctica that had never been seen by human eyes before, with the expedition under Admiral Byrd.'

'Some difference,' said Sciple approvingly.

Admiral Canaris folded his table napkin. 'You should know better than to let me gossip on like this.'

The admiral almost had the napkin folded back to its proper shape, as he always did. He never left it untidily on the table. Then his eyes closed and he shot the napkin up in front of his face as he sneezed.

He was about to say something when he sneezed again.

'Three for something better,' a girl at a nearby table giggled as the admiral buried his nose in the napkin for the third time. Finally he pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his eyes.

'There must be pollen around here somewhere to start off my hay fever like that.'

'I sneeze when I'm getting a cold,' said Sciple.

'Don't be so damned stupid, Rudi.' The admiral tapped the end of his nose gently with the handkerchief. 'Do you think I don't know the difference between a cold and hay fever?'

Sciple changed the subject. I'm glad the flight's off for a definite period, everyone gets so nerved up when they're not quite sure what's happening and they just have to wait.'

'As a PIO you shouldn't want things to go to schedule every time, the newspapers and TV soon lose interest in a story once it's cut and dried.'

'I remember hearing someone say earlier in the day that the operation wasn't being staged just for the benefit of the newspapers,' Sciple answered. He enjoyed this bantering with the admiral. It only took place when they were alone. 'Buddy hour', he called it.

He was staggered by the next remark. Without any warning

the admiral asked: 'Who's this girl you've got, the one you think no one knows about?'

Holding the smile was a tremendous effort for Sciple. At first he thought he would deny it, but he could tell by the look on the admiral's face that wouldn't work. Spengler must have told him. He wondered how he'd brought the subject up. He just couldn't go gossiping to the admiral.

'She's just a dame I met on a plane,' he said tentatively, 'there's not much special about her.'

'You're putting me on,' the admiral told him. 'My wife told me about it. She heard that you are going to get married.

'She only knows the bare details and she wants to know more. So do I, I'm really intrigued.'

My god, thought Sciple, he's serious. He really did want to know. Hesitatingly at first, and then responding to the sympathetic encouragement he received, he told the full story about Jenny.

At the end it was the admiral who was embarrassed. 'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to drag your private life out of you like that,' he said.

Sciple felt a fool. 'I wouldn't like you to repeat all that,' he mumbled.

'No,' said the admiral, reassuringly. 'Gossip's not my line. I shouldn't have probed, I guess.'

'I had to talk to someone sooner or later,' Sciple said. 'It's a relief in a way.'

Canaris was philosopical. 'Funny thing is we never make allowances for anyone being human. People we're in contact with every day, we think we know a lot about them and we don't know anything.'

Sciple agreed. 'If I'd produced Jenny in public nobody would have seen us as a man and a woman but as a lieutenant-commander, over forty, with a young dame. It'd have been like a sick joke to them.'

'I don't quite follow that,' said the admiral. 'We've been here too long. C'mon we're on our way.'

The admiral went home early and attracted by the laughter and shouting wandered down the sloping lawn to the Avon, flowing between its willow-lined banks. It was a small river, only a few yards wide and exceptionally clear. The noise was

being made by his girls, messing about with their canoe.

They were trying to paddle two ways at once and all they were doing was whipping the water white.

'Don't you go getting wet there,' he called, 'or you'll be catching cold.'

The girls thought it over and decided that if their mother arrived that was exactly what she'd say, only she would make them get out of the canoe.

They put their heads together and paddled upstream. 'We'll be back soon,' they called, as they disappeared around the bend.

Canaris fondly watched them go. It was fun having the girls around and he liked the spacious house with its host of trees and green lawns and the little river.

Gwen Canaris came quietly up behind her husband. 'A penny for your thoughts,' she demanded.

'I didn't hear you coming.'

'You were standing there lost in thought, that's why. Just what were you thinking about?'

'Oh nothing,' said Canaris. 'We won't be doing any flying till late Sunday, or Monday, so I thought I'd come home. I went back to my office after lunch and cleaned a few things up and here I am. I'm picking up bad habits from the New Zealanders. They start slowing down early Friday afternoon, getting ready for the weekend.'

Gwen Canaris laughed and, tugging on his arm, led him back to the house. 'Don't you let some of my new friends hear you talk like that or they'll start picketing us.' Arm in arm they walked inside.

'What about a drink?' asked Canaris when they entered their living room, warmed by a cheerful open fire in the grate.

He held a glass for Gwen and started to pour Scotch into it when he knew he was going to sneeze. He hastily put the bottle and glass down and groped in his pocket for a handkerchief. Before he could pull it out he sneezed violently.

'Excuse me,' he said.

'Are you getting a cold, dear?'

'Of course not,' he snapped back.

'I only asked,' she said.

'I'm sorry,' he said tenderly, wiping his nose and his eyes

and putting his handkerchief away. 'I just can't afford to get a cold now, Gwen, I couldn't go down to the ice if I had one.'

'That's your rule,' she smiled at him.

'I've only broken one of my own rules once, you know.'

'When was that?'

'Long, long ago. Long before I even met you.'

Sixteen

THE TRUCK braked and slid briefly over the frost-hardened mud before it pulled up near the helicopter pad and Commander Keeler and Lieutenant Smith got out.

'You come back for us as soon as you hear the chopper come in,' Keeler instructed the driver. Immediately the truck's gears grated and it roared away back to the base, half a mile away.

'Look at it,' said the commander, waving his arm towards the sea ice, 'where did you ever see a finer sight than that?'

Into the distance sprawled McMurdo Sound, bathed in the moonlight, and far away stood the sentinel mountains guarding the approaches to the hinterland. The stars glittered above the eerie moving curtain of an aurora which draped itself across the sky.

The lieutenant didn't look up but tramped steadily towards the helicopter, chewing on his cigar butt.

'I've seen enough of the Sound the last two days to last me a lifetime,' he grumbled, as he climbed into the chopper and pulled the seat belts tight around his ample waist.

Keeler joined him and the chopper's blades began to revolve slowly with a hiss. When they thwacked steadily the whole machine began to vibrate.

'You all set?' the pilot shouted to them. Twisting around, Keeler could see only the pilot's legs, encased in heavy flying boots.

'Take her away,' he called in reply. The helicopter lifted and moved forward, nose down. They rose above the base, the

stream of frigid air blasting in through the open door getting stronger as they moved faster.

The helicopter tilted and both men hung by their seat belts.

The lieutenant nudged Keeler. 'I hope these belts hold.'

'They will,' Keeler assured him. 'Anyway, whose idea was this?'

Smith spat out his cigar and it rolled across the floor and then dropped out of sight. 'This is the best way I know of seeing that everything about the strip is O.K. He'll make approaches from both ends and we can see exactly what it looks like.'

They sat in silence as the helicopter climbed steadily and flew down the sound, the lights of the camp passing out of sight and being replaced by the dominating Mount Erebus, a halo of steam rising above the crater.

A tangle of compressed ice crept down the mountain, reaching for the frozen sea, an ugly blotch on the symmetrical slopes.

The cold air hurt Keeler's eyes but he would not close them or shelter them with an upraised arm as Smith was doing.

The helicopter turned again and the mountain disappeared. There was a brief moment of gloom and then the two straight lines of the flickering flare path came into view.

'Take a look at your efforts,' said Keeler, rapping Smith's arm.

'I'll hand it to them,' said Smith, admiring the flarepath, 'they got it lit quick.'

The chopper dipped down and slid crab-like towards the runway and the two rows of fuel drums burning a mixture of oil and petrol which marked it.

Thirty feet from the ground it levelled off and sped down the two miles of the runway and then climbed again so that the two passengers could get a good look at it from the southern approaches.

'Boy, you've made it perfect,' said Commander Keeler enthusiastically, 'that flight is going to be just no trouble at all.'

'You should have been here yesterday,' Smith replied.

Keeler had forgotten that the weather had cleared only a few hours previously and he tried to make amends.

'How you and your men worked through that blizzard I'll never know,' he said feelingly.

'Just ask them,' said Smith, 'we'll be down there in a

minute.' They sped down the runway again and hovered on the fringe of the cluster of shelters before setting down beside them.

'What a way to see the ice! Flying around in a chopper in mid-winter with the door open,' said Smith. He took off his gloves to unshackle the seat belt and the cold metal burned him.

He winced but did not complain and drew his gloves back on again. Commander Keeler got unsteadily to his feet, his legs stiff with cold.

'We won't waste much time here, you've got to get some sleep,' he announced.

Smith rubbed the thick stubble on his tired face, and tried to grin. 'It's over fifty hours since I was last in the cot, but my boys have had it tougher. I've been sitting on my ass most of the time. They've been out in it.'

He jumped down on to the ice and the jolt hurt him. Commander Keeler followed slowly, easing himself down. 'It will be worth it,' he answered, 'you see that plane come in here and you'll know it was worth it.'

The pair of them, balloon-like in their cold weather outfits ducked instinctively under the slowly revolving blades as they made their way towards one of the lighted vans.

'Don't expect much of them, they've had it,' advised the lieutenant as he led the way up the steps. He opened the door and pushed inside, Keeler close behind him.

An oppressive wave of heat greeted them and the peculiar smell of tired, sweating men. There were nine of them, luxuriating in the warmth from the oil-fired stove which growled deeply as a continuous stream of fuel dripped into it.

The small table and the floor were littered with cold weather clothing, heavy jackets, lined parkas and wind-proof pants.

'For crissake, it's like an oven in here.' Commander Keeler started to unzip his parka.

'I'd rather fry than freeze,' said Mulcahey languidly, both his hands clasped around a mug of coffee.

'Move over,' he ordered, 'and let the commander and the lieutenant up to the stove.'

There was barely a movement and Keeler intervened. 'It's all right, we'll sit here.'

Mulcahey bumped the man sitting next to him and they made a space.

'Some coffee,' Mulcahey ordered again. Another two mugs were set down on the table.

'You take off them heavy clothes, commander, and get comfortable like us,' Mulcahey advised.

Keeler looked dubiously at him.

'That's right,' said Mulcahey earnestly. 'Get down to your shirt at least, let the heat get in.'

'He's right.' Lieutenant Smith struggled to pull his jacket off.

'Of course I'm right.' Mulcahey looked around for support but no one seemed interested. 'You stay out there long enough and even these clothes will freeze for three layers down and when you get inside they won't let the heat in. So we take them off.'

The men closest to the stove, Keeler noticed, were stripped to their singlet. They were crouching about it, absorbing heat as a blotter takes in ink.

'How was it over the last couple of hours?' Lieutenant Smith asked at large.

Lynsky leaned over the table towards him. 'It was like banging your nuts with a hammer. It felt good when we stopped.'

Mulcahey cut in. 'I never thought we'd friggin well survive about four o'clock in that blizzard. If anyone had ever told me I'd work out in anything like that I'd have said they were off their rocker.'

'We were off our rockers for doing it,' said Lynsky, still leaning across the table. 'Look at this.' He thrust his face close to the commander's. Under his right eye, the size of a dime, the flesh was white.

'And this.' He spread his left hand on the table.

Commander Keeler inspected it sympathetically and felt the stiff fingers. 'You get the doctor look at that.'

'He's seen it and he said I'll live. I'm not as bad as some of the others.' Lynsky pulled away to look around at the other men.

They neither moved nor volunteered any information about themselves.

They were spent, Keeler realised, exhausted shells that the

cold and wind had driven the spunk out of, too tired to care or complain.

There must have come a time, thought Commander Keeler, when they were past caring and inertia was all that had kept them going.

'Your most vital part didn't get frost-bitten, Lynsky,' growled Mulcahey, 'what have you got to complain about?'

'Forget it, just forget it, but don't ask me to work all night in a blizzard again.' Lynsky retreated towards the stove.

'You ain't complaining, lieutenant?' Mulcahey asked, 'you been here most of the time with us.'

Smith lit a cigar. 'Nope, I'm not complaining but like Lynsky here, I wouldn't like to do it again.'

Commander Keeler felt out of it, but he'd come to say something and he knew he'd better get on with it.

'I don't think you'll ever be asked to do anything like that again. I even think that maybe you wouldn't have been asked to do it this time if it had been realised what you'd have to go through, but you'll see, as I was saying to the lieutenant, that it was worth it when the plane comes in and Giovanni goes out. That boy's got to get out quick. He can't last here.'

'We know that, the doc told us,' Mulcahey interrupted, 'but if you-know-who dreams up any more bright ideas he needn't worry about having us working out in blizzards.'

'Can it!' Lieutenant Smith said softly, 'don't make with your big mouth so much.'

Keeler carried on evenly, as if he hadn't heard Mulcahey at all.

'I expect the plane to be here in about six hours. They left when they got our last weather. And I'll tell you what they're also bringing, fresh milk, fresh vegetables, fresh fruit, oranges, and mail.'

'Then I'll be there to meet it.' Mulcahey was determined about that.

'You tidy up here and then get back to the camp to bed, the lot of you.' Lieutenant Smith surveyed them all. 'That's the trouble with you. I can't get you out of bed and then I can't get you back in. You've done what you had to do here, you just get back up there and sleep.'

Lynsky edged his way down the van again.

'Lieutenant,' he said, 'after what we done we're entitled to see that plane come in if we want to.'

Smith capitulated easily, as was expected of him. 'O.K. then, see it come if you want, but then get straight to bed or I won't be able to get any work out of you for a month.'

He was grinning as he stood up. 'Time we were going.'

Commander Keeler paused at the door and turned around. 'I want to say thank you,' he said, and followed Smith out to the waiting chopper.

The lieutenant banged the door shut as he climbed into the helicopter after the commander and sat on the bench alongside him, not bothering with the seat belts.

'I guess I'll wait up for the plane too. Not much sense I guess in not seeing it right out to the end. Can't blame the men for feeling that way.'

Keeler hunched his fur-lined hood closer about him.

'There's something I didn't say there, perhaps I should have, but it wasn't the time.'

'What was that?' Smith asked.

Keeler looked worried.

'The admiral's not coming.'

'He's not what? You're putting me on.' Smith leaned towards the commander and nearly fell off the bench when the chopper lurched.

'He's not coming because he's got a cold.'

'Very funny, commander, I didn't know you made jokes like that.'

'This isn't funny,' snapped Keeler. 'It's a rule he made last year, no one with a cold comes down here where it's germ free. He made the rule himself and now he's caught a cold he won't break it.'

'Jesus wept,' said Smith, 'I've heard everything now.'

The chopper set down on the pad and the truck headed down from the base to collect them.

Smith was still shaking his head disbelievingly as he climbed into it. His cigar had gone out and he had forgotten to relight it.

Seventeen

THE TWO aeroplanes stood on the tarmac waiting to go. The ground crews had finished their incessant prowling around them. Now they stood waiting, fuelled, provisioned, their engines lifeless but ready to spring to life. To the east the first thin streaks of the new day began climbing higher. To the south the sea fog began to roll into a bank which obscured the horizon.

A half hour before the aircrews had struggled out and climbed aboard, carefully and methodically going through the cautious drill which preceded every long flight.

Major Heapy was growing impatient. His fingers and his eyes had been all over the instrument panel and now he sat back and waited.

'What the hell's going on?' he growled to Lieutenant McAuley, his co-pilot, 'they fix a time and here we are still waiting.'

McAuley wanted to get going too.

'It's not like the admiral,' said Heapy. 'He's usually ready before we are.'

'Last I heard he had all the brass in his office. Perhaps he was making a farewell speech.'

Major Heapy ignored the attempt at humour. 'I'll go and have a final look around,' he said, 'once he's aboard we're off, no more mucking around.'

For Commander Spengler the night had been a long one, filled with minor irritations which he made into issues as he grew more tired.

He had not left the base since the previous afternoon when he knew that the McMurdo runway would be prepared on schedule and that the weather was improving.

A dozen times, with all the preparations being made smoothly, he had decided that he really was not needed and that he could go home and return early in the morning, an hour or so before the flight departed.

But he could not go, and he knew it. He had to be there, if

wanted, especially if the admiral wanted him. What a rumpus there would be if someone said to the admiral, 'I'm sorry, sir, Commander Spengler is not here, he has gone home.'

So he stayed on. He was tired of the incessant chatter of the teleprinters down the corridor and the deluge of messages they were carrying from the ice. Most of them he merely glanced at. What were they getting so worked up about down there? he thought. Keeler seemed determined to send every bit of inconsequential information he had.

The admiral had arrived at 6 a.m. and closeted himself with Sciple.

That annoyed Commander Spengler most of all. He was affronted that the admiral should come to the base he commanded and ignore him.

'The pair of Jewish bastards,' he said out loud.

'Beg pardon, sir,' said a man from the teleprinter room who had just come in with another message.

'Oh nothing,' snapped Spengler, wearily. He snatched the message and glanced at it cursorily while the man retreated. Then he threw it in the basket and sat back to wait for the call which must come.

The night for Commander Sciple had started quietly in the apartment where he lived with Jenny. He had arrived there early in the evening and she was busy in the kitchen, preparing a meal for him.

'You just sit down for a minute and read the paper, I won't be long,' she instructed him.

Sciple began to protest but she firmly pushed him out of the kitchen. 'Be good,' she ordered, 'and in another ten minutes we can eat.'

'A little kiss first,' pleaded Sciple, and she lightly brushed his lips. He was eager and tried to hold her.

'Away, you bad old man,' she whispered, slipping past him.

Pouring himself a drink Sciple sat down on the sofa, enjoying the happiness which had eluded him for so long. The apartment with Jenny in it was heaven to him.

He could hear her clicking around in the kitchen on her high heels. Every time he thought about Jenny he realised how lucky he was to have her and he was determined never to let her go.

'A penny for your thoughts,' she said brightly as she came

into the room, carrying the two plates of soup. 'I bet they're about the flight tomorrow.'

'Guessed wrong,' he answered, 'They were about you, darling.'

'What about me?'

'Just that you are one of the best things that ever happened to me.' He joined her at the table and impulsively took her hand. 'We'll sort things out so that they're permanent, just as soon as I get back from the ice.'

'What time do you expect to get back, Rudi?' She was deliberately steering the conversation away from the serious line he had introduced.

'I'd say in the early hours of the morning. We won't be hanging around down there, in and out really, just refuel and turn around. Major Heapy says an hour on the ice or thereabouts and he has the say, he's driving,' Sciple added brightly.

'You know what I think about a flight to the South Pole in mid-winter. I think you men are just making it because you want to prove something,' said Jenny.

'It's not to the Pole, it's just to McMurdo, the Pole's eight hundred and fifty miles further south than that, you couldn't land up there in the winter.'

'It's the same thing,' Jenny replied illogically, 'I've been reading the papers, you're all going because it proves something and I don't think that poor little sick man comes into it much.'

'Well, what are we going to prove then?'

Her smile was so disarming that he could not feel annoyed. 'Oh, I don't know, but when something like this is done there is always something in it for those who do it, isn't there? I bet you that in ten years no one will remember the name of the poor little sick man but they'll remember that it was Admiral Canaris who made the flight down there to get him.'

'I hope that's right,' said Sciple earnestly, 'It'll prove I did my job.'

'There you are! Doesn't that prove what I was just saying?'

'Maybe, maybe not. Go get the steak,' he ordered. 'I'm hungry.'

She gathered up the empty soup plates and disappeared into the kitchen and he lit a cigarette while he waited. Jenny had

the capacity to worry him at times, especially when there was an element of truth in what she said.

They were lingering over their coffee when he looked at his watch. 'I'll have to go soon. I'll have to shoot out to the base for a while, but I shouldn't be there too long. I'll be back by ten o'clock.'

'Why that's unfair you should have to go out, you have to be there so early in the morning.'

'Some of those guys out there are going to be up all night, Jenny,' he told her.

'I still think you should have a good night's sleep,' she said

Sciple bent over and kissed her forehead. 'Honey, I'll be as fresh as a daisy because it's up to you to see I get a good night's sleep, and then I can sleep all the way down on the aircraft.'

'Don't wait up for me,' he called to her as he made for the door. 'I'd rather you didn't.'

It was almost eleven when Sciple got back to the apartment. He let himself in quietly and walked softly along the passage to the bedroom. As he quietly opened the door, Jenny put her book down.

'You're late. I was starting to wonder if you'd get back.'

'It's all systems go out there, baby,' he replied. 'I'm lucky to get back by now. You know, there were newspapers ringing up that I'd never heard of before. What a spread,' he chortled as he took his tie off and undid his jacket. 'Yes sir, the operation hasn't had a coverage like this for long enough.'

The moment he slid into the bed she snapped off the reading light: a street lamp shining through a fanlight lit the room vaguely. For a while he lay on his back, still excited. The long distance telephone calls had created a sense of drama missing before. All his own misgivings and fears were forgotten.

As he lay and thought about it he almost forgot Jenny. Then he turned on his side and slipped his left arm under her neck. She turned in response and snuggled in against him.

Presently her even breathing alarmed him. 'You're not going to sleep?' he whispered.

'We should, you've got to be away so early in the morning.'

'I don't like little dolls that close their eyes as soon as you lay them down.' He was kissing her as he said it.

'They're only toy dolls, I'm real and alive.' She pressed against him and he felt strength surge through him in response to the subtle pressure that she made. Her hands, hesitant as they always were, but shyly determined, made him groan.

He desperately wanted to remember every detail of the next few minutes but the waves of passion obliterated everything. When they finally receded they left him spent.

Drowsily he thought of things he wanted to say to Jenny but when he mustered the words she was sleeping. Anyway, he decided, he would say it when he got back.

Admiral Canaris pulled back the drapes from the windows and looked across the wide lawn to the tall trees on the edge of the stream that were casting long shadows. He had an impulse to go out there and be alone but it was killed by the voice of his wife, filled with concern.

'You've hardly spoken a word since you came home, dear,' said Gwen Canaris, 'tell me what is worrying you.'

The admiral did not move but continued staring out of the window. 'The flight, that damned flight,' he answered at last.

'There would be nothing wrong if I were going and I'm having second thoughts about that decision too,' he said. 'Anyway, I haven't told anyone I'm not going yet and that is worrying me.'

He pulled the drapes together, walked across the room and sat down beside her.

Gwen Canaris was trying to be understanding. 'But it's so simple, Peter, you set the rules and you stick to them.'

He sighed. 'It's not as simple as that. I've put the heat on ever since this thing started, I've pushed them along here, and I sent them out in a blizzard to build the strip at McMurdo, and now I'm thinking about not going myself.'

'But it's one of your own strictest rules,' she protested, 'you decided two years ago no one who has a cold goes down to the ice until it's better.'

'That's the trouble. I've even stopped a Congressman going but it seems a damned stupid rule at this time and place.'

She looked at him tenderly. His eyes were watery and his nose blocked.

'I remember when you brought in that rule, Peter. Didn't someone go down there and infect the whole base?'

'It wasn't quite as bad as that, but almost.' He fished in his pocket and brought out a handkerchief, just in time, as he sneezed again.

Before he put the handkerchief away he dabbed at his running eyes. 'You know what worries me, Gwen; in my heart I'm not sure that I want to go. Me,' he said, slumping back against the cushion, 'the one who above all should be going, is the one who will be staying here. Do you think I may be afraid?'

'Why that's ridiculous. I don't see what getting a cold has to do with being afraid. You shouldn't even be thinking like that, blaming yourself for something that isn't true.'

'Perhaps it's the way I feel. Things get a little screwy when you've got a heavy cold. But look, Gwen, seriously, why haven't I told the men yet I'm not going, isn't it because I feel kinda guilty and if I do, what am I guilty about? It can only mean that I know I should be going.'

'I'm glad that no one else is about to hear you talk like this,' said Gwen primly. 'I've never heard such nonsense in all my life.'

Canaris smiled weakly at her. 'You do me good,' he said. 'You know, I am not really afraid.'

'I know what you really are, Peter, you're disappointed, and you scheme so, you won't admit it but you're casting around for all sorts of reasons to justify a decision that doesn't need justifying. You didn't make the rules tonight, you made them two years ago.'

'I'm well aware of that,' he said, 'if they weren't long-standing I'd have no hesitation in breaking them.'

'Come on up to bed,' she said tugging him to his feet. 'You're still going out to the base early and you've got to get some sleep.'

'I'll go in the guest room. I don't want to give you my cold.'

She walked quickly away. 'You've given me more than a cold in your time.'

'Wicked woman,' he said, following her. At the top of the stairs he caught up with her and put his arm around her shoulders as they walked down the corridor.

'I don't know how I got on before I met you,' he said softly, 'you're the only one I can talk to. That's the worst of being an admiral. There's no one to talk to, not about the doubts and the

worries. Admirals aren't supposed to have them.'

'You're feeling better, aren't you?' she asked as they lay in bed.

'Physically no, mentally yes. I'll just tell them I'm not going and that's that. It's easy to do the right thing, and now I know I'm right.'

He moved to kiss her but she turned away. 'Don't go spreading that cold, remember.'

The news was broken to Commander Spengler at exactly 6.10 a.m. He was summoned to the admiral's office and asked to sit down in the chair directly opposite the huge desk. Admiral Canaris sat straight in his chair, his arms resting on his lap. Commander Sciple sat nonchalantly in an adjoining chair with the ease and poise Spengler found impossible to affect in the admiral's presence.

Spengler listened, poker-faced, while the admiral spoke. He was incredulous when he heard that the admiral was not going south, but not even a flicker betrayed his surprise.

There was the same set mask on his features when the admiral told him he was to go in his stead, but his stomach muscles began to tighten and it took all his willpower to damp down the pain that resulted.

His mind began to race over the details of the flight that he had done so much to prepare and a confusion of thoughts began.

It never occurred to him that the admiral was making a sacrifice in disqualifying himself. When his initial surprise passed Spengler could think only of himself. He had a fleeting vision of the rewards he could earn. For the next few minutes that the admiral was speaking, Spengler existed in two worlds. He was conscious of what was being said, but at the same time he projected himself into the future, his future with the opportunities so unexpectedly being presented.

Canaris brought him back to earth.

'Don't sit there stone-faced, Spengler.'

'Beg pardon?' he answered as if he hadn't heard.

'Don't sit there like a wooden Indian, say something.'

Spengler fumbled for words while his mind cleared. 'Well this is so unexpected, sir, I never dreamed, I mean to say even when I saw you last night when you were getting worse, that you could bring yourself to such a decision.'

'No doubt, and it is unfair to spring it on you like this; it was a hard decision for me to make.'

Spengler murmured sympathetically.

'Any questions?' Spengler thought and then asked, 'I'll have full command?'

'The same authority as I would have on the flight. You represent me and you take my authority with you,' Canaris assured him.

'There are things I'll have to do and there is not much time before we go.' Spengler began to stand up.

'Yes, of course, but come back here when you're ready. I'll ride out to the aircraft with you.'

Commander Spengler paused by the door. 'Will I tell Major Heapy he's not flying the lead plane, or will you?'

'You tell him,' said the admiral, 'it's your baby now.'

'I can't understand it, why take Heapy off the flight?' asked Sciple when the door closed and he and the admiral were left alone.

'Heapy's my pilot. He's flown me for two years and where I go he goes and when I don't go, Heapy doesn't go.'

'I can't follow the logic of that.'

'Maybe there's no logic in it,' said the admiral, not caring.

'You look all in, if you don't mind me saying so.' Sciple looked at the admiral with genuine concern.

'You know how it is, you get stuffed up to hell and you've hardly been to sleep, one thing and another.'

The admiral turned away while he blew his nose vigorously. 'I've been thinking again how calmly Spengler took the whole thing,' he said, putting his handkerchief away.

'Not as calmly as you might imagine,' said Sciple cynically. 'I've got to hand it to him, he can pull the shutters down when he wants to, but that scheming mind of his would be way in front of you.'

'I wouldn't have sent him if I didn't think he was competent,' said Canaris sharply.

'He's competent all right, but he always looks after Number One.'

'Everybody does.'

'Maybe, but they're not always people I don't like.' What was the use of arguing, thought Sciple he wasn't getting anywhere.

'I expect I'll have Heapy in here any minute,' observed the admiral.

Sciple shook his head. 'You won't, you know, that's not the way that guy works. If he's doing anything right now he's clueing Fortrose up.'

'You'd be right.' Canaris gave Sciple a long stare. 'You've got everyone around here figured out, haven't you?'

'Not you, admiral, my figurin' doesn't go above the rank of commander,' Sciple grinned.

'I can't figure myself out sometimes,' said Canaris ruefully. 'You know, I may go down as the first man in history who wouldn't go to the coldest place on earth because he had a cold!'

Canaris guffawed heartily but Sciple wasn't fooled. It's worrying him, he thought, he still doesn't know whether he's made a wise decision or one that was plain bloody stupid.

The latest reports from McMurdo were brought in and laid on the admiral's desk.

He glanced through them and looked pleased. 'They're getting a break now. A good, clear, cold, starry night. They lit the flarepath on the airstrip and they estimate it could be seen from fifty miles out.'

'Here's to a happy landing then,' Sciple said jauntily. He felt in his pocket and reassuringly touched his packet of alkaline tablets. Already he'd felt a few sharp twinges. Why did he ever have anything to do with aeroplanes?

The brief knock and the opening door announced the return of Commander Spengler.

'If you're ready now, admiral, we'll be getting away.'

'After you, commander,' Spengler said to Sciple and reserved for himself the privilege of walking out last with the admiral.

Under the wing of the aircraft they stopped and the admiral and Commander Spengler were posed by a Navy photographer. Spengler smiled easily at the camera as he shook the admiral's hand.

Now that the moment of departure had come Canaris had a sudden impulse to reverse his decision; but it was too late now and he knew it.

His lips parted in the merest acknowledgement of a smile while the photographs were being taken. 'Good luck,' he said to

Spengler and then slowly walked away.

Sciple watched the scene from the doorway of the aircraft, an amused grin on his face. He went and sat in his seat as soon as Spengler began to climb aboard.

The door was fastened and one by one the propellers began to turn. For a short time the whole aircraft throbbed to the full power of the engines and then they were eased back. Lieutenant Fortrose took the brakes off. The aircraft moved gently away, out to the end of the runway.

It was light enough for Admiral Canaris to distinguish it as it turned and began its run. Three-quarters of the way along the runway it rose at last, climbing steadily, the red tail-light winking a final farewell.

The admiral watched until it disappeared seawards. Then he went back to his office.

Half an hour later he heard Major Heapy's back-up plane take off. Never had he been more alone.

For nearly an hour the plane flew parallel with the New Zealand coastline, as if reluctant to leave the unending chain of mountains rising steeply above the fertile plains which kept pace with them.

Gradually Fortrose turned away and began to fly due south, climbing again until the green sea below was barely distinguishable through the gathering clouds.

Commander Spengler walked back and plonked himself down in a seat beside Sciple.

'What's on your mind?' he asked genially.

'Nothing much. I'm just not what you'd call a keen flying man.'

'Come on, this is going to be a piece of cake.' Spengler was buoyant. He offered Sciple a cigarette.

'I'll have some of these,' said Sciple cramming pills into his mouth, 'they relax me.'

'You never know when opportunity comes knocking,' said Spengler happily. 'This could be just the break I needed. I kept telling myself I wasn't one of the honour and glory boys in the war, so what! But here comes honour and glory, tailor-made, just an aeroplane ride down to the ice and back, but the first during an Antarctic night! And under my command. That's what counts.'

'For crissake, Ralph, lay off all that enthusiasm stuff, will you, someone might hear,' said Sciple.

'Someone will hear, like someone in Washington. You'll do O.K., too,' Spengler added as an afterthought.

'Listen,' he insisted, 'we've got to make this a success, we might never get another chance like this.'

'The more chances like this we don't get, the better it suits me.'

'Where's your spirit of adventure?' countered Spengler.

'You haven't got one either. You've just got a bad case of ambition and that's a dangerous thing to get late in life.'

Spengler grew angry. 'I might have known that's all I'd get from you. You just can't forget it can you? You're the admiral's man even though he's chickened out and is back in Christchurch. It's us who's doing the flying, remember?'

Sciple flared. 'When you talk about chickening out it shows just how little you know. You wouldn't know the man well enough to understand his obsession that everything is done right, even to binding himself to one of his own goddam rules.'

'Obsession you call it,' said Spengler scornfully, 'that's a new word for it.'

Sciple grabbed his jacket and pulled his face close to his own. 'That'll keep,' he whispered, 'you just went too far.'

Spengler swept Sciple's hand aside and stood up ruffled. He was determined not to let the exchange end at that point and then the thought came to him. He smiled silkily at Sciple.

'I've just had a thought. It's not the admiral that you're so worried at leaving behind, it's that little doll that you've been screwing in Christchurch. She must really keep it up to you if you can't bear a couple of nights away.'

Sciple half rose up out of his seat and then sank back again

'Go and take your poisonous tongue somewhere else,' was all he said before turning back to the window. His stomach was starting to hurt, but it was too late to do anything about it except try to relax.

It was always too late, so far as he was concerned, thought Sciple bitterly, too late for everything. As the plane flew on he dozed fitfully and the pain lessened.

Three hours out Lieutenant Fortrose stretched his legs contentedly. The aircraft was flying beautifully, the steady

rhythm of its four engines a constant symphony of the perfection with which they were working.

They had left the clouds behind and there was only the sea seventeen thousand feet below them. It was angry and white-flecked from the tremendous wind pressure being exerted on it but the aircraft rode serenely on its high course.

'I'd rather be up here than down there,' said Fortrose to Reeves.

The co-pilot nodded in agreement. 'Me too. You don't have to have much imagination to realise what it'd be like in a ship down there.'

'It would never make it through the pack anyway, not in winter.'

'Talking of the pack, you've seen that horizon glow?'

'Sure, another half hour and we'll be over the first of the ice; come to think of it, there's not that many people who've seen it in winter.'

'We're lucky we're going to. I still can't understand the old man's decision to send us,' said Reeves.

'Well, I can,' said Fortrose. 'When he decided not to go himself he sorta set the whole operation down a key. He doesn't go and sends Spengler; Heapy doesn't go and he sends us instead.'

'I see how you figure it,' said Reeves, 'this flight isn't quite the heady stuff it was before.'

Fortrose laughed. 'Don't get alarmed, you'll still get your medal, but remember, the focus is always where the admirals are, that's a way they have in the Navy. Who am I to say they're not wrong?'

'Suits me,' Reeves grinned at him, 'I don't care what's where. All I know is that this aircraft is going down to the ice in winter and we're flying it. In my language, that's something.'

'Mine, too,' Fortrose agreed.

The navigator cut in. 'The Point in ten minutes,' he announced.

'O.K.,' replied Fortrose, 'so far as I'm concerned we're already past it.'

Reeves made some rapid mental calculations of his own. 'Hell,' he said, 'I'd forgotten about point of no return. Just goes to show, we got it made or I'd be sweating.'

They fell silent and resumed their vigil of the control

panels, Fortrose's long fingers wandering over the levers and switches and feeling them reassuringly.

The plane continued to ride on evenly and the first of the great slabs of ice began to pass below, white islands in a sea that had grown strangely calm. The pools and stretches of black water between the ice grew rapidly less frequent. Soon there was only the locked and integrated ice, the tremendous impenetrable white girdle that guarded the Antarctic approaches in winter.

With the arrival of the ice, the light began to fail. The stars began to show and the exhausts from the engines glowed faintly for the first time.

Rushing onward in an undeviating line, serenely indifferent to the elements below, his aircraft was turning the flight into boring routine, thought Fortrose.

He was tempted to say so to Reeves but he thought better of it. That might be chancing fate a bit, and that wasn't wise with only frozen sea below.

Half an hour past the point of no return he spoke to Heapy for the last time.

'I'll be seeing yuh,' Heapy had drawled as he turned for home.

Fortrose hadn't expected him to say much more, knowing his disappointment as he tagged along one hundred and fifty miles behind instead of flying the lead aircraft.

But when he knew that Heapy was flying in the opposite direction on his way back to Christchurch, the sky seemed much more empty than it had before.

As a caution he made every check that he could and ordered the others to do the same.

'She's going like a bird,' Reeves reported happily.

A shrug was the only reply he got from Fortrose. He hadn't forgotten that they had yet to land and take off again. Maybe on the return journey he could relax but he didn't think so. If the flight was all that easy it would have been done before.

Commander Spengler arrived on the flight deck, saying nothing to the pilots at first but peering ahead into the night sky in the curious way, Fortrose absentmindedly noted, that all non-fliers did.

'Not much to see out there,' Spengler remarked at last.

'When you're flying you see it all here.' Fortrose waved his hand across the instrument panel.

'How long now?' asked the commander. Stiff with sitting down he was getting impatient.

'Three hours will see us on the deck, but we haven't been talking to McMurdo for half an hour now.'

'You've had trouble contacting them?' Spengler asked sharply.

'Nothing unusual, you get a lot of atmospheric freaks around these parts, auroral interference and that sort of thing. We were flying in sight of another aircraft last season but the only way we could talk to it was through Christchurch. Nothing unusual about it.' Fortrose yawned reassuringly.

The look on Commander Spengler's face showed that he was far from satisfied. 'What about Christchurch? Are you talking to them?'

'Well, we were, but they went out about the same time as McMurdo. They'll come again.'

'Pardon me for saying so,' said Spengler sarcastically, 'but this doesn't seem to be bothering you much. I'd like to know about the weather on the ice.'

Who's flying this aeroplane, Fortrose wondered to himself, but he answered patiently. 'There's some cloud around and the wind has been rising, about sixteen knots now, but nothing to worry about. I'll keep you posted,' he volunteered.

His attempt to end the conversation failed.

'Look,' said Spengler, 'I don't like this radio failure much, things change too fast down there for us not to know what's going on.'

A smile trickled around the corners of Fortrose's mouth. 'It don't make much difference,' he said. 'Fact is we're committed to go on no matter what, we haven't got enough fuel to go back, not from this far out. I'd have thought you'd realised that.'

The commander stood up straight. He hadn't even thought about turning back until Fortrose had mentioned it. Now that he realised it was impossible things didn't seem so secure.

'I'll let you get on with it then,' he said testily and went back to his seat.

Reeves was grinning happily to himself. 'You spoiled the trip

for him,' he told Fortrose.

'I don't know about that but I'd sure like to hear from them down there though.'

'Like you told the commander, you couldn't even talk to an aircraft you could see last season.'

'There was a difference,' Fortrose answered. 'We were flying away from the ice then, not towards it. Come to think of it, another plane didn't get down there for a week.'

'You're not worried?'

'Goddam it, pilots are always worried, you should know that, it's part of the business.'

Unable to decide whether Fortrose was serious or not, Reeves said nothing as they bored on into the night.

Commander Spengler paused by Sciple. 'They've lost radio contact with McMurdo.'

Sciple turned around in his seat and stretched his arms, before slumping down again in a sleeping position.

'It often happens,' he murmured.

The important thing Commander Spengler decided, as he sat down, was that it was happening now. He didn't believe that he was the only one who was concerned but he wished he hadn't said anything to Sciple. It was never wise to communicate doubt. If nothing happened it was taken as a sign of weakness. If something did there was a responsibility for not having done something about it.

Eighteen

COMMANDER KEELER walked through the admin. building, barely acknowledging the busy men in it, and slumped down in the chair behind the desk in his office. The anxieties of the night were beginning to etch themselves into his face and he ran his hand tiredly through his hair. Doesn't anything ever go right in this God-forsaken place, he wondered.

'You want anything, sir?' asked a bearded face which

appeared cautiously around the door.

'Get me some coffee and find Lieutenant Smith for me,' Keeler ordered.

The head withdrew and the commander swivelled around in his chair and faced the wall map.

He calculated that the aircraft would reach Cape Hallett in an hour and then it wouldn't be much more than another hour before it was overhead.

He'd always enjoyed that flight down from the Cape along the coast of Victoria Land, with the tops of its buried mountains barely breaking through the massive covering of snow and ice that blanketed them.

But it wouldn't be a tourist flight for Fortrose, not when he couldn't make radio contact with anyone. What was the weather like out there, Keeler wondered, and decided immediately that it would be calm and clear, giving no hint of what it was like further south.

Although he should have known better he was still surprised at the way the weather had deteriorated at McMurdo. What a time for it to pack up.

He swung his chair around to face the door again as Lieutenant Smith entered.

'I don't like it,' said the big man, 'not a bit. It's a bastard out there; we're in for what we had last week.'

'Don't say that,' Keeler reproved sharply.

'Commander, I don't like it any more than you do but believe me it'll be a miracle if an aircraft lands out there tonight. Even a chopper couldn't find that strip at present. When it snows and blows at the same time, you know what that means.'

Keeler looked up sharply. 'I didn't ask you over here to get a lecture on white-outs, you'll be telling me next that with falling snow and wind-blown snow the horizon disappears.'

The lieutenant chomped on his cigar, unperturbed. 'Nope, all I was saying was that the archangel Gabriel himself couldn't land a plane out there at present, not with conditions the way they are.'

'O.K. But we've got to try and see that it does get down and that's what I want to talk to you about. That flare path you're going to light, how long will it burn for?'

Smith looked up at the ceiling and calculated. 'About fif-

teen minutes, I'd say, give or take a few minutes either way.

'Why I want to know,' Keeler explained, 'is that my guess is that the weather will clear partially and then close in as quick as it did before. What I mean is, that it will be on again, off again, and that the plane coming in might have to abort almost at the last minute and maybe do a few circuits before it can try again. I want to keep those flares burning as long as possible.'

'We'll keep them burning for an hour if you can spare the fuel.'

'I'm not worried about fuel, I'm worried about that aeroplane.'

'We all are.' There was no mistaking the rebuke in Smith's voice.

'You've done a great job. Just finish it off for me.'

'Of course we will,' Smith assured him, feeling a need to turn the conversation into lighter channels.

'I'll go straight down to the ice and kick those fat asses warming themselves around the stove and get them cracking putting more fuel in those flare drums. Just leave it to us.'

'Thanks,' Commander Keeler smiled at him. 'I'll be down there again myself, about an hour before the plane's due.'

'What a helluva time to get a radio blackout, we could have told him to go back if we'd been able to get through.'

Keeler shook his head. 'That wasn't on. By the time it even looked like being marginal here he was committed to keep coming. He wouldn't have had enough gas to get back.'

'He certainly needs a bigger slice of luck than he's had so far then,' said Smith, zipping up his jacket and preparing to go.

Commander Keeler accompanied him to the door. 'Hasn't been plain sailing for any of us, has it?'

Smith went on his way without answering. Already he was visualising the reaction when he got out to the strip and asked the men to go out and put the extra fuel in the flares. They'd moan like hell and he couldn't blame them.

Outside the snow had eased off, but the wind was stronger than ever, sweeping through the deserted streets of the base with a razor's edge.

'Where to?' asked the driver, emerging from the building after him.

'Out to the ice again.'

'I hope old faithful knows the way,' said the driver, as they climbed into the Snowcat, 'I'm not too sure I can find my way out there.'

'Just follow the markers. We put them in for guys like you.' Smith didn't give the driver any sympathy.

'O.K.' The driver spun the Snowcat around and headed down hill towards the sea ice. As soon as they bumped across the tide crack the lights picked up the first marker, but beyond that was a white curtain. The snow was coming down again, thicker than ever.

The driver rubbed his gloved hand against the windscreen, trying to pick up the second marker.

It suddenly loomed at them and he nearly ran it down.

'This is crazy,' he complained.

'Keep her going,' was all the lieutenant grunted in reply.

The brakes slammed on and the lieutenant pitched forward. 'What the hell are you doing, Robbins?'

Fumbling, the driver put the Snowcat in gear again and it began to edge forward. 'I thought I saw a hole.'

'You got twenty feet of solid sea ice under you, boy, there aren't any holes. Just keep her going.' He's scary, thought Smith, but he didn't blame the driver. He was only a youngster. Probably only nineteen.

A mile out they ran into a clear patch and increased speed. Smith pulled the window back and could see stars. 'With a bit of luck it's going to clear,' he observed.

His optimism didn't last long. Ten minutes later the snow came blindingly again, almost too fast for the wipers to clear it.

The cold crept in from the outside, settling in their knee joints and making them stiff.

'How far back did we pass that last marker?' Robbins was rubbing at the windscreen again.

'Don't worry about markers, over there to the left.' The lieutenant indicated the gleam of yellow light coming from one of the trailers parked near the edge of the runway.

I'll be popular with those bastards, he thought, when I tell them to go out and top up the drums.

The driver close behind, he trudged up the steps of the trailer and barged his way inside.

As always it was the big and gregarious Mulcahey who gave the greeting. 'Hiya, lieutenant, what brings you down here?'

'I was just passing so I dropped in.' Mulcahey and the rest of the men roared.

'He was just passing so he dropped in,' said Mulcahey to his audience, 'on a night like this.' His big frame shook with mirth.

'What's doing? What's going on?' he asked suddenly.

There was an easy grin on the lieutenant's face as he surveyed his men. 'I got just one more little job for you to do. I want more fuel in those flares so they'll burn for half an hour maybe.'

An incredulous murmur ran around the room.

'You want us to go out there again?' Lynsky asked.

Mulcahey pushed him aside and faced the lieutenant.

'Why?'

'Because that plane's still coming and it's got to get down, somehow. He'll have to wait till it's reasonably clear before he starts his landing run but if it mushes in like it is now he'll have to go up again and wait. Once those flares go out it'll take an hour to get them fuelled up again and that'd just be the time we wanted them. If they burn for half an hour there's a margin to play with. It's just gotta be done.'

The thought of another hour out in the cold froze every tongue but spontaneously the men began to put on their cold weather gear. In ten minutes they were a collection of baggy, padded figures, their fur hoods pulled in so tightly their faces were almost hidden.

'Remind me some time to get me a posting up in the Pacific, as near the equator as I can get,' called Mulcahey as he trudged towards the door.

Lieutenant Smith smacked him on the shoulder as he went past. 'You'll get all the heat you need and more, but not on this earth.'

All the men filed out, leaving the lieutenant and the driver alone in the van.

'They actually joke about it, that's what beats me,' said Robbins.

'You don't know this crew,' replied Smith. 'They're never more serious than when they're joking. They're all worried about that aeroplane. Once you've been on the ice you learn to worry. Real good.'

He shut the door and sat down to wait. Once Mulcahey and his men had finished their job, that was all any of them could do.

Lieutenant Fortrose recognised the Sleeping Beauty, the iceberg which was aground off Cape Hallett when he flew out at the end of the summer season. It was nearly fourteen miles long and three wide and for weeks it had slowly drifted away from the Shelf until finally its great bulk came to rest near the Cape. The open sea had washed around the giant when Fortrose saw it last. Now it was locked in the embrace of sea ice.

The navigator on Major Heapy's aircraft named the Sleeping Beauty and it had become a familiar sight, immobile until the bottom of it eroded and it could continue its ponderous journey northwards.

Fortrose had once brought his Hercules down and skimmed a few feet above its flat surface. Some scientists he had on board told him it might stay where it was for two or three years.

At first Reeves had difficulty in distinguishing it. 'I'm damned if I can see it, it all just looks like sea ice to me,' he complained to Fortrose. He finally made out the outline of its bulk rising above the pack a few minutes before it started to disappear under their wings.

The moonlight made a faint line of black shadow on its south side and Reeves realised then how Fortrose had been able to spot it so quickly.

He was about to say so when McMurdo came back on to the air again. The voice was strong and clear and Fortrose answered immediately.

'What's your weather?' Fortrose wanted to know. Reeves turned in alarm when he heard the reply but Fortrose sat impassively, pressing for more details than the hurried gush of information he was first given.

'What do you think?' asked Reeves, taking advantage of the first break.

'Not our night, I reckon. We should be into it soon, maybe

half an hour, it seems to be pretty much localised in the McMurdo area.'

The calmness of the pilot soothed Reeves. 'Might be a bit tricky getting down then,' he said casually.

'You can say that again, but you heard what he said; it's been clearing off and on out on the strip. All we want is just a few minutes to get down and if we have to wait a while it won't matter. Those flares will burn for half an hour.'

Fortrose resumed his contact with McMurdo, guided now by the controller speaking to him directly from the runway on the ice.

He was looking ahead as he spoke, seeing the faint outline of the mountains far ahead fade into nothingness as the storm swept over them.

The storm was flowing like a carpet from east to west, and to the north the weather remained clear. They could tell from the aircraft's response when they approached the division line. For hours it had ridden evenly, now it was starting to twist and bump as the turbulence rose from below.

'She'll need to get a lot better than this,' observed Reeves. They had drifted down to twelve thousand feet and were flying through cloud.

'I'd say it'd be thickest here, they haven't got it as thick as this down to the deck at McMurdo, remember.' Another ten minutes' flying proved Fortrose right. They emerged from the cloud but the ice was still hidden by the layers below.

The Navy air controlman remained in constant contact and Fortrose tried hard to visualise the vicinity of the ice strip as he had seen it many times during the summer.

He had set a course to take them sixteen miles south of Ross Island and the 12,000 ft. volcano which rose from it.

The ground radar had been turning for half an hour, its mechanical parts prevented from freezing by hot air hoses, and it confirmed that they were exactly on course.

There was no worry, Fortrose decided, in descending sharply and levelling around a thousand feet above the strip. The aircraft pitched and rolled as they went down. In their concentration, the pilots forgot about their passengers.

Commander Spengler gripped the side of his seat as the descent got rougher, holding on tightly to relieve the strain on

the seat belt which was cutting into him.

'What the hell's going on?' he called to Sciple.

'It's obvious, isn't it, we're going down.'

'Through this, he must be mad.' The last time Spengler had looked out the window before he had dozed off the night, had been clear. Now all he could see was an ugly mist which was even dulling the red flames of the engines' exhausts.

'I'm going up to see about this.' Commander Spengler began to fumble with the buckle on his seat belt.

'For God's sake, don't you know he'll be too busy right now to worry about you?' cried Sciple.

The aircraft dropped sickeningly and Commander Spengler had to hold on tightly again. He noticed that the crewmen were tightening their seat-belts and he did the same. Why hadn't he been told the weather was going to deteriorate? At the very first opportunity, he decided, he would have something to say to Fortrose.

A faint smile of amusement loitered on Sciple's face as he regarded Commander Spengler. As usual Sciple had been unable to sleep and he had spent hours gazing out of the window. He had observed the stars disappearing as soon as they neared the bad weather, but even when they were in the thick of it he had kept his head turned to the window.

It was almost inevitable, he decided, that the weather had been too good to last. What would Fortrose do if he couldn't get down at McMurdo? There wouldn't be nearly enough gas to get back to Christchurch.

Spengler appeared to read his thoughts. 'If we can't land at McMurdo, we haven't got enough gas to get back to Christchurch.'

Sciple continued looking out the window.

'You heard what I said?' Spengler demanded furiously.

Slowly Sciple turned around. 'Sure I did. I was just calculating that we wouldn't have to swim more than a thousand miles.'

'That's very funny.'

Seeing Spengler rattled gave Sciple an exquisite pleasure and made him forget that his own safety was also in peril.

'Wonder how the admiral would act in these circumstances?' he said, trying to give the impression that he was merely thinking aloud.

Spengler refused to be embarrassed by the remark as Sciple had intended. 'He isn't here, is he? And that's probably not coincidence.'

At a thousand feet Lieutenant Fortrose levelled off and cruised up the Sound at one hundred and eighty knots. From the ground controlman he knew that the strip was only two miles ahead.

'We can hear you but there will be no show of seeing you, not through this murk,' said the controller.

Fortrose put on the powerful landing light and told the ground what he had done. He passed over them like a faint shooting star.

Commander Keeler and Lieutenant Smith had stood outside too long waiting for the aeroplane, and their stiff legs could hardly drag them up the steps into the heated trailer.

The driving snow had frozen where it touched them and their eyes seemed sunken behind a bristling white mask. With difficulty Commander Keeler withdrew his arms from the giant mittens that hung suspended from the cord over his shoulders and pulled back his frozen fur hood.

A mug of hot coffee was handed to him and the steam from it rose deliciously over his chilled face. He drank half of it before he spoke to Smith, his voice lowered so that the enlisted men would not hear.

'I don't like it at all. A blizzard like this could go on for hours.'

'Or it could stop or ease off just like that.' Smith tried to snap his fingers but they were still too cold and stiff.

'We are so bloody helpless. There's nothing we can do,' muttered the commander. 'He can't circle around up there indefinitely.'

'How long can he?'

The commander bit his lip and calculated. 'At the outside four hours. After that . . . ' He buried his nose in the coffee mug again.

'It was always a long shot anyway, wasn't it? I think we all had that feeling, even while we were building the strip.'

'It might have been a long shot,' Keeler interrupted him fiercely, 'but now that plane's here it's got to get down.'

The lieutenant's fat face set in a solid line of annoyance.

'Don't think I don't know that. What do you think me and my men have been doing out here for the last three days?'

'What are we snarling about?' Commander Keeler said placatingly. 'We've both done our goddam best. I think that's what's worrying us. What more can we do now than wait?'

Once warmed they went over and waited in the van with the ground controller, sometimes taking part in the steady chatter between him and the aircraft.

The cool and unhurried voice of Fortrose amazed Commander Keeler. After a time he too shared Fortrose's confidence that the weather would clear.

'We've still got enough gas for another three hours,' he said cheerfully when the first hour of his circling overhead passed. 'It's gotta clear sometime.'

Fortrose kept his aircraft flying on a straight course high above the strip, turning and heading back the way he had come after thirty miles.

At first he had felt scared, but after a time his fears diminished to apprehension. He was able to think again in a cool and collected way and thoughts passed through his mind in an orderly procession. It meant nothing to him when he realised that it was desperation that was making him so cool.

'I suppose you know,' he said to Reeves, 'that it doesn't look like we're going to land down there? It won't clear up before our gas runs out.'

'Sure,' replied Reeves, 'I've been thinking that for some time, but I've also been thinking that we've gotta land somewhere.'

'That's exactly what I've been thinking and I reckon I know the place.'

'You do, where?'

'A couple of hundred miles back.'

Fortrose wanted to laugh. There they were talking about the most important decision they'd ever had to make while flying and they were chatting about it as casually as if they were trying to decide what to have for breakfast.

Immediately Fortrose mentioned the distance Reeves knew what he meant. 'That iceberg?'

'I don't think we've got any other chance. We can't go down through this soup, it's right to the deck and the longer we hang

around here waiting the less chance we've got of trying anything else. We're just using the gas we'll need.'

'What about trying to get down on the sea ice when the weather's clear?'

Fortrose ruled out that idea. 'Sea ice is too rough; no, we'd never make it on there, but the berg should be O.K.'

He explained what he had been thinking about for the past few minutes. They would land on the berg and wait until the weather cleared at McMurdo and then use jato to take off and fly up there. It would be close but he thought that they'd just have enough fuel to do it.

Every detail made sense to Reeves, and he thought it was urgent that they should get started and said so to Fortrose.

'Take her round and head for there; I'll go back and tell the others what we're figuring on doing,' said Fortrose, climbing out of his seat. The more he thought about it the more he was convinced that they were doing the right thing.

As soon as he saw Fortrose edging his way back to them Commander Spengler knew that something was seriously wrong. Until then he had been able to convince himself that the weather below would soon clear and they would go down.

'What's going on?' he demanded. 'What the hell is going on here?'

'We're having a little trouble,' Fortrose explained deferentially, 'the weather beneath us is thick, right down to the deck and it's just impossible to try and land.'

'What are we going to do, just float around here until we crash?' the commander asked.

'That's just what we're not going to do,' said Fortrose confidently.

'Maybe if you weren't being interrupted you could tell us what you had in mind.' Sciple thrust himself between the pilot and the commander and waited enquiringly.

Omitting the detail, Fortrose explained his intentions and then left abruptly to explain them to the rest of the crew.

Unexpectedly, Spengler thrust his cigarette pack towards Sciple. 'Take one,' he ordered, 'we need it.'

Spengler's hand never wavered as he held his lighter out to Sciple and then lit his own cigarette.

'Well,' he said, 'we're at least doing something positive.'

The man is really composed, just like someone who's made a will, thought Sciple. The transformation amazed him.

The aircraft was climbing again, its engines throbbing deeper than when they had been cruising and the crewmen were moving swiftly up and down the cavernous hold, working quickly and willingly under the direction of the crewmaster.

Undoing his seat belt Commander Spengler got up and walked over to sit down alongside Sciple.

'Emergency procedures,' he said nonchalantly, indicating the crewmen. 'Funny isn't it, we're part of it but I feel detached now. I guess you feel the same.'

'There comes a time when all you can do is sit around and wait,' replied Sciple.

He was glad of Spengler's company but it was difficult to think of things to say to keep the conversation going. His mind kept racing ahead to the iceberg they were going to try to land on.

'I'm not so worried about the landing but getting off again is going to be a different matter,' he told Spengler.

'That'll be the least of our worries,' Commander Spengler assured him.

'We've got sixteen of those jato bottles on board and each one's got a thousand pounds of thrust. Those solid fuel babies pack a punch. Sling the sixteen of them under the wings and that's the equivalent of sixteen extra engines pushing us off. We'll make it all right.'

What a curious thing, thought Sciple, Spengler sitting down beside him and dishing out the comfort. Cynically he decided that the commander was only talking to him to reassure himself.

The crewmaster stopped by their seat. 'Keep those seat belts done up real tight,' he advised, 'it may be a bit bumpy when we set down and if the pilots have to hit the brakes hard you'll need something to hold you in place.'

Spengler and Sciple pulled their belts tighter.

'You know what happened last year?' the crewmaster continued brightly, 'we were just touching down at McMurdo and the skipper throws out the anchor for some reason and there was a passenger who'd undone his belt. He just flew like a bird till he hit that bulkhead down there. Lucky he hit with his shoulder

and not with his head. He'd have pulped himself otherwise.'

'A cheerful bastard,' observed Sciple as the crewmaster moved on.

'Don't be fooled by him,' Spengler advised. 'I was watching him while they were getting all that gear secured back there, no mucking about with him. He was dead serious. You ever noticed how people make jokes when they're scared?'

'Ralph,' said Sciple earnestly, 'I've been that sort of funny man all my life.'

Spengler looked at him. 'You know, I'm getting to like you. I'll have to get to know you better when we get back. We went wrong somewhere before.'

'I can understand that, I was always in the admiral's shadow. This would be the first time you've seen me out of it.'

'Maybe the same goes for me too.'

The plane flew on and Sciple noticed that he could see the stars again. Below was the ice, the sterile mantle of the sunless winter.

The decision by Lieutenant Fortrose not even to attempt to land came as a relief to the men waiting on the ice strip. Commander Keeler squatted down on a stool in the controller's van, enormously relieved that what he knew would be a hopeless attempt at landing would not take place.

In the hour since he had followed Lieutenant Smith out on to the ice his tiredness had been compounded by almost unbearable tension. His driver had twice lost the way in the wind-whipped darkness and Keeler had instinctively known that the storm would not blow itself out for hours.

There was a feeling of despondency in all the men he met and it was made worse the first time the aircraft flew overhead. The sound of its engines reached them faintly for a few seconds above the howling wind and then stopped abruptly. They had strained to catch a glimpse of its landing light, but could distinguish only a passing gleam, and a faint one at that.

Only the radar saw the aircraft, following its journeying to and fro high above them.

What would the pilot do? Keeler wondered to himself as he waited. Every time he made up his mind to ask, his innate good sense stopped him. The pilot would have enough on his

mind without being asked futile questions from the ground. So all he could do was wait and the longer he waited the stronger grew his feeling of impending disaster.

Lieutenant Smith had been no comfort to him. 'He won't make it,' he observed, the first time the aircraft flew overhead. 'I've seen it like this too often. I'd say ten hours at least before it stops blowing.'

'For crissake, shut up,' Commander Keeler had snarled at him.

No one ventured an opinion after that and every man was left with his own thoughts and growing apprehension. Now the issue had been decided for them and taken out of their control. They all felt as if they had been released from a cage. The shifting of the responsibility had given them their freedom.

Commander Keeler spoke to the lieutenant for the first time since he had snapped at him. 'What do you think about this iceberg, as an engineer?'

'Well, it's apparently better than here, that's for sure, and he's a good pilot and knows what he's doing. It might be just a little soft on top for a heavy aircraft but then its got a thousand feet of ice beneath it, and that's solid enough.'

'He says he's got fourteen miles of it to land on. That's seven times the length of this strip.' For the first time Commander Keeler was beginning to sound hopeful.

Smith ran his hand around his jowls, as he always did when he was concentrating. 'Getting down wouldn't be so bad, but I'd say it'd be a different proposition getting off. It's not my line but I'd say that once his engines have stopped for a time he'd never get the oil heated to start them again.'

The same doubt was nagging Keeler. 'That crossed my mind too. There'd be no gear there to do that.'

'There'd be nothing to stop us taking it to him, providing the weather clears,' Smith offered. 'We could run gear down there in a couple of hours in a chopper.'

Why was he forgetting things like that? Of course they could, thought Keeler, getting to his feet.

'My ass has been so close to the floor on that stool, it's starting to freeze,' he announced. The grinning faces around him reflected his returning optimism.

'I wouldn't be surprised,' he added, 'if this story doesn't have

a happy ending after all; no sir, it could pan out just right.'

Smith chewed vigorously on his cigar. 'Those boys of mine bust their guts making that strip. There'll be hell to pay if someone doesn't use it.'

'That settles it,' Keeler joshed him. 'We'll have to get a plane in here at some stage.'

His decision to land on the berg had been communicated to the ground by Lieutenant Fortrose with few words. He ignored the first feeble protests and curtly declined to go into the details that were being raised.

'We'll take that up later,' he said, 'there'll be plenty of time for that when we're on the deck.'

'Someone down there is worried already about how we're going to get off again. What about that?' he remarked to Reeves.

'We'll cross that bridge when we come to it,' the co-pilot replied grimly.

Fortrose said little more as they flew on, his thoughts centred on the landing he would soon have to make. The most important landing for a pilot was the one he was making at the time, an instructor had once told him.

That was logic, he thought. He decided that they would save fuel by going straight in because he couldn't see any sense in cruising up and down. They were committed to go in quickly anyway. The more fuel they could save the better.

The berg was so long that there was plenty of room. He would approach it at about five hundred feet and then put the plane down as gently as he could and then, if possible, just let the skis touch and try to sense through them the firmness of the snow that would have accumulated on the ice.

There didn't seem to be any reason why he shouldn't find a good running surface that they could also take off from without any trouble.

In an hour they had the stars for company again and the storm was left behind them. A brilliant moon made the Victoria Land coastline gleam and smoothed the harsh contours of the mountain peaks which struggled above the burden of ice.

Reeves was looking at them also. 'Some sight,' he observed.

'There won't be much else to do for the next couple of days except look at them and try to keep warm,' said Fortrose.

They began to lose height gradually, drifting down towards the Sleeping Beauty thirty miles away. Fortrose took the controls from Reeves and the aircraft began a long curve towards the berg. He spoke unhurriedly to McMurdo, telling them exactly what he was doing. The questions from there had ceased and they merely acknowledged him and added occasional words of encouragement.

The engines ceased pounding and muttered harmoniously as they eased downwards and the outline of the iceberg presented itself dead ahead.

Five miles out Fortrose lowered the undercarriage and a light glowed on the panel to indicate that it was locked in position, holding the skis in place.

The iceberg rose a hundred feet above the frozen sea and instinctively Fortrose took the aircraft a little higher as it raced towards them.

'Here we go,' he said to Reeves as they cleared it comfortably and settled on the final descent.

The landing light cut a swathe down the iceberg as the aircraft gently rode lower and the iceberg lost most of its dimensions and became an unending featureless, white slab.

A mile slipped beneath them, then another. Fortrose talked quietly to McMurdo, 'almost there' he said, and then he let the plane settle.

The propellers raised a cloud of fine snow and it swirled high behind them. The skis touched the surface and they raced forward for half a mile, the pilot's hand on the throttles, easing them back.

The disaster came too fast for Fortrose to know what had happened or to do anything except to instinctively pull the throttles wide open and simultaneously wrench the wheel back.

It was too late. There was an agonising scream of metal tearing as the skis hit the low wall of ice and were torn from the landing gear. The plane bounded into the air, an ugly skein of twisted fuselage dangling from it. Out of control it soared in a cruel bank until the lower wingtip bit into the ice and instantly folded under the tremendous strain.

For a brief moment the plane straightened and then rolled violently when the other wing hit, an engine tore loose and dropped flaming.

A ruptured wreck, the plane fell back to the ice and slewed for half a mile, strewing a trail of debris behind it, and an engine still roared madly when it finally stopped, but this too was silenced by an explosion and the yellow fire-ball which crept across the petrol stained snow.

The explosions continued for a quarter of an hour, making the pyre burn even more fiercely and swelling the pall of black smoke which drifted slowly down wind.

Commander Sciple regained consciousness slowly. He was vaguely aware of floating down a long corridor and just before he opened his eyes he seemed to come to a gentle stop. He put his hand out and felt the cold sheet of a hospital bed. The light burning nearby hurt his eyes and he could feel the warmth from it too. How white were the sheets on hospital beds, he thought.

When it began to grow dark again he tried to move but his body would not respond, but he continued to puzzle until he realised he had been in an accident. The effort of thinking was exhausting and he began to drift again, not caring because he knew that Jenny would be coming soon to care for him. He could hear her heels clicking along the corridor. And so he died.

In the ashes of the Hercules, where they had died, were the pilots, Fortrose and Reeves, the rest of the crewmen, and Commander Spengler. For others, the long night would come to an end. For them it was just beginning.

Nineteen

THREE hours had passed since Admiral Canaris learned from McMurdo that they had suddenly lost contact with the plane but still he waited in his office, carefully reading each message as it was brought in. As the winter afternoon drew swiftly to a close he sat waiting and thinking, so deliberately courteous to those who brought the messages to him that they went quietly away as if they feared that words would break a spell.

The alarm in the first messages from Commander Keeler had given way to careful optimism. In his last message he had reported that the weather was clearing and that he intended to send out a helicopter to the Sleeping Beauty to investigate. The chances were that the mishap had not been serious and that the radio had failed.

With his instinct for sensing disaster, Admiral Canaris knew that it would be a waste of time and not worth the risk, and he sent an order back that no rescue mission of any kind was to be attempted.

He ignored the protesting reply that promptly came back from Keeler and the in-flowing messages from Washington he also largely ignored after reading the first few.

At last his mind was made up. He picked up the telephone and asked for Major Heapy. He had hardly hung up when there was a knock at the door and Heapy walked in. As the admiral had suspected, he had never been very far away.

'You know why I've sent for you?' Canaris asked.

'I think so,' he answered gravely.

'What do you think happened?'

'I can't figure it out. He was a good pilot, and careful, but he would have been desperate. He had to get down somewhere. In his position, as things were, I think I would have picked the same place.'

'So would I.' The tone of the admiral's voice prompted Heapy to go on.

'I've never landed on one of those bergs but it's been done before, in daylight admittedly, and in a small plane, but it has been done, which makes me think he might have made it and then run into trouble.'

'No, that's where you're wrong.'

'I've been sitting here thinking and I think I know the answer.' The admiral brought his hands together until his outstretched fingers touched.

'Here's the berg, this end grounded on the land, this end still floating free. It'd look to be stationary but the sea is still moving it, up and down like this.' His hands demonstrated the movement.

'There would be an enormous strain on that with tide movement, enough to break it right through, just the way it broke

off when it first left the shelf. That broken bit wouldn't move far, not with the pack frozen in around it, but it might have moved up a little.'

'Moved up! My God, you're right.' The movement of the admiral's hands presented a graphic picture to Heapy. He could see the aircraft skimming along, its skis riding easily on the snow and then encountering a wall of ice, perhaps only three or four feet high.

'I don't need to tell you any more, do I? You know what would happen.'

The major's face was drawn and set in hard lines but his voice betrayed his feelings. It was little more than a whisper.

'If he did see something, right at the last minute, he'd try to climb away on full power but if his undercarriage was sheared off he'd be out of control and he'd hit again, with a wing probably and then he'd smash to pieces. Probably burn too.'

'That's the way I figured it. There would be no time for anything. He'd hardly know what hit him. That would be the only consolation.'

'Consolation for whom?' Heapy asked sadly.

'For all of us,' said Admiral Canaris.

He's hurt, thought Heapy, deeply hurt, but he couldn't feel sorry for him, only for Fortrose. There would be nothing to cry over if the admiral hadn't got the idea of making the flight in the first place.

He began to think how coldly analytical the admiral had been, sitting there thinking not at all about Fortrose and his crew but trying to decide what had gone wrong. Things and events, that was the admiral's main concern. He only regarded people as instruments of bringing them about.

'It's a matter of what we do next,' said Canaris.

'I'll go if you say so.' He must tell me to go, Heapy thought, he was prepared to go, but not to volunteer. It had always been the admiral's show and if he wanted to see it through to the end then he had to keep making the decisions.

'We'll go if you say so,' said the admiral quietly.

'You mean you'll be coming too?' The admiral had taken Heapy by surprise.

'That's the idea,' said Canaris carefully. 'There won't be any other passengers, just me, you, and your crew.'

'I thought that if you disqualified yourself before, then you'd do it again, in the circumstances.'

'What circumstances?' the admiral asked, his voice growing deceivingly soft.

A non-committal shrug was the only answer Heapy could give. The conversation was drifting dangerously for him. He wished he'd shut up.

'You can't bring yourself to say it, can you?' said Canaris. 'There's a whole lot you'd like to say but you just can't do it can you?'

Heapy groped for words. 'I'm sorry, I think things have kinda got on the wrong track, I didn't mean . . . '

'I hope you didn't,' Canaris intervened, 'but perhaps some time you do some thinking about principles; don't get too stuck with them, they'll get you into a lot of trouble.'

'Admiral,' said Heapy earnestly, 'if it hadn't been for your principles you and I would be stuck on that berg, right now.'

'That's your good luck and it was Fortrose's bad luck, but that's not what we're here to talk about,' Canaris added briskly.

No introspection about him now, it's down to business, Heapy realised.

'What will you do on this flight that Fortrose didn't do?'

'About the only thing I guess is to fly without anyone backing us up. If we go down there'll be no help.'

'It wouldn't be any use anyway. What else?'

Heapy thought hard. 'Nothing,' he said at last, 'we just fuel up and go.'

'Right.' The admiral hit the desk firmly with his open palm. The decision was made.

'I want clear weather at McMurdo before we leave here. As soon as you get confirmation of that, we can go.'

'It's clearing there now, we should be airborne in a couple of hours.'

Canaris dismissed Heapy curtly. 'You have got things to do and so have I. Nothing more, is there?'

'No,' said Heapy, 'I don't think there is.'

Alone again, Admiral Canaris wandered around his office, thinking over his encounter with Heapy. A couple of his comments he remembered all too vividly and in retrospect he felt embarrassed by them.

It was a sign of weakness to reveal his mind and there'd been no need to.

His restless roaming brought him to the telephone again and he sat down and dialled home.

Gwen Canaris had worried all afternoon when he hadn't called. She had also worried and fretted that there was no way in which she could help.

'Are you feeling better?' she asked.

'It's nothing to worry about,' Canaris grumbled. 'I'll eat out here and I'll sleep here too. There's too much doing; I can't spare the time to come home.'

'Do you think you're being wise?' she asked concernedly.

'Of course,' he snapped, 'you know I won't leave here while I'm still wanted.'

'Of course, darling, but you take good care of yourself. Come home as soon as it's over.'

'That's exactly what I intend to do,' Canaris replied gruffly. 'See you later.'

She was putting the children to bed when she heard the big plane go out. Only then did she realise that in his own peculiar way, Canaris had been trying to say goodbye.

Except for the foothills of Mount Erebus, which were lost in the shadow of the peak rearing above them, the rest of McMurdo Sound was lit by brilliant moonlight. Lights twinkled as a tractor moved along the airstrip and far beyond, in the direction where the aurora danced, even a pencil line of distant mountains could be distinguished.

Commander Keeler followed the tractor's progress for half a mile before he spoke. 'Look at it,' he said to the doctor standing alongside him, 'have you ever seen a more beautiful sight than that?'

'It's not beautiful,' said Commander Heatherington. 'It's like a pretty girl with the pox. It only looks beautiful. When you know it well, it's rather disgusting.'

'Why'd you say that?'

'It's only a superficial beauty, that's why. As long back as you can think the only thing it's done is harm. It's never done anyone any good.'

'Come on inside,' said Commander Keeler. 'You're just get-

ting morbid out here.' He led the way into his quarters and took off his gloves and jacket.

'Make yourself comfortable,' he told the doctor, 'we've a while to wait yet.'

Stretching out his legs Commander Heatherington sat back in the chair with a sigh. 'I can't stay long. I've got work to do.'

Keeler sat down near him. 'There's a lot of feeling about us not being allowed to go out and see what happened up there on Sleeping Beauty. I almost took no notice and sent a chopper anyway. They were keen to go.'

'You stick your neck out like that and it'll get chopped off,' said Heatherington. 'You just do as you're ordered.'

'Then why is he coming down, isn't that risking other necks? His too, this time.' Keeler was angry. 'It makes me sick when I think what it's cost us so far.'

'Who's being morbid now?' Heatherington taunted him.

'These are my men we've lost out there,' Keeler shouted. He banged his glass down on the table. 'The whole thing has been shagged up from start to finish. If you ask me it all stems from that damned crazy flight he made down here before the war. He made a balls of that and he's been wanting to do something like it ever since.'

'For Christ's sake,' Heatherington intervened, 'you ought to talk. You've been blowing hot and cold on this deal ever since it started; you didn't want any flight, then you did, now you don't again, you don't even know yourself what you want. You're getting like the rest of them, every single thing goes wrong you blame the admiral.'

Keeler stood up, trembling, and slopped another drink into his glass. He drank it quickly and then sat down again.

The pair of them sat in awkward silence which Keeler eventually broke. 'Maybe you're right. We've all been through a lot lately. Could be it's been too much for us.'

'How long is it since you've been to bed?' Heatherington asked sympathetically.'

Keeler shook his head. 'I don't know, but I don't feel tired.'

'You're past that stage, you're exhausted. Come on over with me and I'll give you something,' Heatherington offered.

Keeler declined and reached for the bottle.

'No more of that, not the way you are, and remember, I'm the doctor.'

No resistance was offered by Keeler. 'O.K.,' he said, 'if you say so.'

'The whole base is edgy and I don't blame them,' said Heatherington. 'They've been working in weather I wouldn't send a dog out in, there's one of their buddies out there under the ice and now a whole plane-load has gone west. They're all just like you. They're just about at the limit.'

Commander Keeler looked at him tiredly. 'I know that.'

'As I was saying before, what a place,' continued Heatherington. 'What's it good for anyway, a great big heap of ice? The only thing it's ever done is make heroes, and most of them dead ones.'

'One I know isn't,' said Keeler, in a flash of spitefulness.

'There you go again, why don't you think it through,' Heatherington snapped back. 'If there is one guy I feel sorry for it's the admiral. He's in crap street as far as he can get. He decided to make the flight down here and everything goes wrong but the biggest mistake he made was not going on that first aircraft. You know what a man he is for principles, well principles kept him off that aircraft, but do you think that anyone will believe that?'

'There will be some sort of inquiry, but they'll believe him all right.'

'They'll believe him officially, sure, but in all their minds there'll be that doubt, even his friends will think that he crapped out of it. You try saying that an ordinary common cold involved a principle and see where it gets you.'

'But it did, I really believe that it did, I'll concede that much.'

Heatherington carried on. 'If everything had gone right they'd be saying what a great guy he was, putting his principles before the kudos, and he could have thought that was the way it'd work out, but it didn't and he's had it.'

'He's still coming, remember he'll be here in an hour,' said Keeler defensively.

'You forget two things. There's no one else to come now, and he's seeing through what he started, getting a sick man out of here.'

'You're right about that,' Keeler agreed. 'I guess I forgot about Giovanni.'

'Everyone always does,' said Heatherington cuttingly. 'If he could, he'd be the one defending the admiral, he doesn't have a chance if he stays here much longer. He wouldn't complain about the flight and no matter what anyone says, it was the admiral's idea. He gets the credit, or blame for it, whichever way you look at it.

'He'll get him out now. The weather is perfect. It won't change, not before they take off again. That's something on the credit side for him that you overlooked.'

Heatherington prepared to leave. 'I've got to go and see the boy's got ready for the journey out to the plane, but we'll have another talk, some time later. I still don't think you get the picture.' He put his hand affectionately on Keeler's shoulder and left.

When Commander Keeler was left alone he moodily looked at the photographs hanging on his walls. They all showed some aspect of the ice, the wide sweeping glaciers descending through the valleys they had hewn between the mountain ranges, the seals with their pups in the pressure ridges, the volcano behind the base with its halo of steam, and a row of aircraft on a busy day during the summer season.

Each one brought back particular memories for Keeler as he walked down the row. The glacier which flowed like a giant river was the Beardmore, up which he had flown on his first visit to the Pole. It was one of the most unforgettable sights on earth, he thought.

At the end of the row was the photograph of Keeler taken soon after they had landed at the Pole, which was distinguished by a miserable collection of half-buried buildings and a barber's pole, with its red and white stripes, that had been brought out from the States.

Keeler and the admiral stood with their arms linked around the pole. There was a heavy scrawl at the bottom of the photograph in the admiral's unmistakable handwriting.

'For my good friend John Keeler, a good man to know,' it said. There was a small blot where Canaris's signature trailed off illegibly.

If the admiral had heard what he had been saying in the last

few hours he wouldn't have written that, Keeler thought.

He'd always considered himself honest and dependable, inwardly as well as outwardly, but now he felt a vague feeling of dishonesty. No, he decided, it wasn't dishonesty, it was a feeling of disloyalty.

That didn't add up either because he hadn't been disloyal. The only thing he was guilty of was arguing with Heatherington about the admiral.

Every order he'd obeyed to the letter. The way he'd driven the men along was proof enough of that. But the longer he looked at the signature on the photograph the more disturbed he felt.

He was just too tired to think straight, he told himself. Everyone was, they'd been through too much.

A knock at the door introduced a fresh-faced young lieutenant. 'You ready to go down to the ice, commander?' he asked.

Keeler put on his lined parka. 'How's it going out there?'

'Just fine,' said the lieutenant, 'the plane's about fifty miles out now, and they're starting to light the flare path. We've got every light turned on here, the whole place looks like a Christmas tree.'

'All we need now is Santa Claus,' said Keeler.

The lieutenant looked at him puzzled. 'Beg pardon, sir.'

'Nothing,' said Keeler, 'let's get going.'

Time dragged for Commander Keeler while he waited for the plane to return. It seemed longer than five minutes since it had whipped along the flare-path, a hundred feet up, and then disappeared into the south.

'He's taking his time about it,' he said to Smith.

The lieutenant kicked at a mound of snow. 'I hope he doesn't take too long. Those flares will last another ten minutes and then they've had it. We lit them a bit quick.'

'When it's as bright and calm as this he hardly needs flares.'

Keeler turned around in a circle. There were no clouds in the sky and it was one of the brittle cold nights he had come to know so well. The lights of the base had a winking effect, like the stars. Perhaps the extremely cold air had something to do with it.

Above the black wall at the far end of the flare-path a bright light was turned on. The modulated roar of the aircraft's

engines, throttled well back now reached them. Major Heapy was making his final approach.

'Jeeze,' observed Smith, resting his bulk against an oil drum, 'he's going to make it so easy we're going to wonder at all the trouble he went to.'

Keeler was thinking the same thing. The landing light marked the aircraft's steady descent as it dropped swiftly and confidently to the ice. Next moment it was down and a long white cloud rose behind as its slipstream tore at the powdered ice and snow.

It rushed past the waiting men, the throttles advanced again and the propellers in reverse pitch. After a mile it stopped and then trundled around and came back towards them.

'Who said we couldn't build an ice-runway?' Smith grabbed Commander Keeler excitedly by the shoulder. 'Did you see that, just no trouble at all.'

'What about your tractor driver?' Keeler asked sourly. What a big oaf Smith was. Because his airstrip worked fine he forgot everything else.

The reprimand didn't worry Smith at all, and he stamped over to where Mulcahey and the other men were standing and began wringing their hands enthusiastically.

Watching them, Keeler was annoyed that they had short memories, but he eventually decided it wasn't that they didn't care, just that they didn't want to remember. Perhaps he couldn't blame them.

The plane came gliding towards him and when it stopped he moved in towards it, a huddle of men pressing behind him. Smith shoved his way through.

'We'll get the admiral straight back up to the base, no hanging around here,' Keeler growled at him.

'Whatever you say, commander,' Smith grinned at him. Nothing was going to dampen his spirits.

The group fell silent when the door opened and Admiral Canaris stood briefly framed in it, and then stepped jauntily down on to the ice, his hand outstretched.

'Well, John,' he boomed, 'so we got here, eh?'

'Welcome, sir,' said Keeler respectfully, not knowing what to do when the admiral embraced him briefly in a bear hug.

'Now we'll have to keep moving because we haven't got that

long here, but I'd sure like to meet these men of yours before we go.' The admiral advanced on the group, hand outstretched again.

'You know Lieutenant Smith.'

'Of course. You built a fine airstrip here, lieutenant. I'm sure you and your men are very proud of it.'

Smith looked uncomfortable. He hadn't been expecting the admiral to lay it on thick like that.

'Well, whaddya say?' the admiral prompted.

The mood was infectious and Smith caught it. 'Come and meet the boys who did the donkey work, admiral, you'll want to meet them.' His cigar at a jaunty angle, his grin from ear to ear, he steered the admiral over.

Commander Keeler tagged along behind, being dragged into the conversation, as the admiral progressed around the group, by occasional questions which only he could answer.

At last he had to intervene. 'If you're off again, admiral, as soon as you fuel up, we haven't got much time to go up to the base and have a meal and maybe meet some more of the men. We'd better get going now.'

'I'm in your hands, whatever you say.'

Canaris obediently followed Keeler to the Snowcat and climbed in. With a cloud of white steam from the exhaust it rattled off towards the foothills where the base nestled.

Keeler found himself being asked one question after another. It was like a routine inspection. The admiral was all questions.

A stream of lights followed them up to the base, and trucks rolled out in the other direction, heading for the plane. Keeler used them as an excuse to stop the questions.

'We've got some traffic right now. Busiest this place has been since last summer.'

'How's the patient going out to the plane?' Canaris asked.

'We're taking him by chopper, least the doctor is, just a few minutes before you take off. There'll be a corps man going back with him of course. I only just found out you didn't bring a doctor down with you, and of course, we can't let ours go. We wouldn't have one here then.'

'Our arrangements weren't all that they might have been,' Canaris acknowledged, but he didn't volunteer any more information.

The Snowcat pulled up outside the mess. 'You want to freshen up first?' Keeler asked.

'No, we'll go straight in, seeing we're running short of time.'

'Most everyone who's not sleeping will be here right now, you can see all you want without having to go far,' replied Keeler.

The buzz and chatter stopped briefly as the admiral stepped inside the mess but after he had waved, it resumed again.

He slowly made his way to the end of the room, stopping at tables at he went.

Again Keeler followed behind. The admiral was completely relaxed and informal but he had the same message for nearly everyone.

'We've come down to help that pal of yours, Giovanni, and I want to thank you boys for the work you did to make the flight possible. You all sure did a great job.'

They were all falling for it, thought Keeler, every goddam one of them.

Didn't any of them really care? Did they all regard themselves just as expendable?

The admiral also baffled him. He'd expected that he'd be subdued and quiet when he got off the aircraft, but he was being just the opposite, large as life.

Even after the meal Keeler had difficulty in leading Canaris out of the mess because he stopped to talk to every man on the way. Twice he had to go back for him and urge him away from a table.

Outside again Canaris put a hand on Keeler's shoulder and walked in step with him back to his quarters.

'How things change,' he said. 'When I first came down to the ice all we had was a few small huts.' They moved to one side to let a truck rumble past.

'And now you've got everything down here and it's hard for us old-timers to adjust to that. I remember when we went out in a small plane to get a sick man only a couple of hundred miles away, at a weather camp, but we couldn't land there and he died. These days we'd have reached him overland easily.'

'Don't forget, admiral, we still don't control the weather here,' Keeler reminded him. 'Look what that's done to us in the last week.'

The fifty-yard walk had brought them to Keeler's quarters

and he held the door open for Canaris to enter. 'I've asked the rest of my staff here so you can meet them but some can't come, they're down on the strip.'

'Before that I'd like to have a few words with you. We haven't got a great deal of time, have we?' The admiral lifted back the sleeve of his jacket and looked at his watch. 'There's still time, though.'

He strode down the corridor and turned the corner past the sign which said 'Admiral's Country, Keep out'. Keeler followed him into the comfortably furnished lounge.

Canaris beckoned Keeler into a chair and sat down beside him.

'I just want to say to you that what you have done down here, right from the start of the planning of this night flight, has been first-class, a really first-class job, and believe me I know the difficulties. You run a good, tight outfit or it couldn't have been done.'

In spite of himself, Commander Keeler flushed with pride, and wanted to hear more.

'We'll have to do something about the men who built the strip,' the admiral was saying, 'it took guts to do that.'

'The whole operation took guts,' Keeler replied, 'it took that even to suggest it in the first place.'

'That's a very kind thing for you to say,' Canaris answered slowly. 'It hasn't been easy, you can imagine that, and the mistakes that have been made have been mine and it's best that they were, because, well, because I wouldn't like to be holding anyone else accountable for them.'

Keeler nodded sympathetically.

'That, however,' added Canaris, 'is by the way, and it's my worry and things will sort themselves out.'

'You haven't said anything about Lieutenant Fortrose, my helicopter pilots are still wanting to go up there,' said Keeler.

'No,' said Canaris, 'not till the spring, and then we'll send a chopper in from a ship. We had a look there, on the way down. Crashed and burned what we could see, but it was enough. We'll bring them out, but not till the spring.'

Keeler looked keenly at Admiral Canaris. There were things he wanted to say but he never got a chance.

'We've got to go,' said Canaris, 'or I'll miss seeing your staff

and I want to do that. You lead the way.'

Commander Keeler stood up. He was feeling old; too old for the long night on the ice.

Admiral Canaris waved briefly from the door of the aircraft and then it shut fast. Almost immediately Major Heapy ran up the engines and the plane quivered and strained and the watching men had to turn away from the fierce blast of the propellers.

They shielded their faces against the stinging snow and only took their arms away when the screaming subsided and the plane began to move gently down the strip.

So that's the end of that, thought Commander Keeler. He had been standing almost motionless from the time that the aircraft had moved away, thinking to the night he had first been instructed to have the runway built. All the events seemed so unreal, now that the aircraft had been and was preparing to go.

Its engines died away to a murmur and its tail-light turned in a half-circle as it lined up and poised at the end of the runway.

Commander Heatherington was watching it too, standing silently beside Keeler, lost in his own thoughts.

Keeler interrupted him. 'Well, he's made it. Against every mortal thing, he's made it. Everyone said it couldn't be done and we all were against him at one stage or other, and now he's made it.'

Heatherington said nothing. He thought that the red light had begun to move forward.

'You know what?' asked Keeler, 'he'll have Giovanni back in civilisation, in hospital, by the time we wake up in the morning and he'll be right back there on top again. He was talking to me tonight about the mistakes he's made, but they won't count for anything then. You pull off something like this and it's just sweetness all the way.'

The light was moving, Heatherington decided, and the engines were on full power too.

There was a sheet of flame as the jato bottles were fired, and the aircraft began racing over the ice. The thunder of the jato bottles grew louder as their full power was unleashed and the aircraft surged towards them.

It was only a quarter of a mile away and beginning to lift off when the remaining eight jato bottles exploded and the plane soared into the air and hurtled beyond the men on the snow, climbing steeply. The vivid flames from the jato bottles suddenly expired and the roaring ceased.

There was only the throb of the engines as the aircraft continued to climb.

Commander Keeler could picture the admiral, sitting in the aircraft, watching the lights of the base gradually fade into the darkness. What a triumph it was for the man, a mission accomplished.

'You've got to admit it,' he said to the doctor as they walked together back to their Snowcat, 'this is his day of triumph. It's a day he'll never forget.'

'He won't, but not the way you're thinking,' said Heatherington.

Commander Keeler halted. 'Why not?' he asked.

'I was going to tell you before but it's easier now that the plane has gone. You were talking about triumphs. Well, there isn't going to be any. Giovanni isn't going to make it.'

'Why not?' asked Keeler stolidly.

'Because he's had all he can take. He was dying when we put him on board and there was nothing that I could do. He won't last more than four hours, that's about halfway isn't it, the point of no return?'

The doctor shrugged his shoulders in an attitude of defeat. 'I'm afraid that for Giovanni the point of no return means just that.'

'Oh,' said Commander Keeler weakly.

But he wasn't thinking about Giovanni. He was thinking of Admiral Canaris. No hour of triumph. Just a long lonely journey home from the ice.

John D. MacDonald

Author of the bestselling Travis McGee series

THE LAST ONE LEFT

the heat of money
the heat of sex
the heat of corruption

A fierce, sharp and biting tale of twisted minds and sensuous bodies which the *New York Times* described as – 'Very damned near the perfect suspense novel'.

As a pleasure girl Crissy knew she had seen her best days. The flesh had begun to sag, the lines had started to dig deep.

As an antidote to thoughts of bodily decay, Crissy cultivated her talent for scheming. And thus came face to face with her private Grand Design.

The main course of the plan was robbery. But side-dishes of murder, blackmail and scandal were all part of Crissy's diet, and using these she clawed her way to a fortune grand enough for a lifetime. If only she could be sure of staying alive long enough to enjoy it.

'Setting : money grabbing Texas, sun-soaked Caribbean, corrupt Florida. Plenty of action at sea – and an amoral ending. First class.' *EVENING STANDARD*

'Everywhere MacDonald demonstrates his ability to handle complex relationships . . . he seems to write out of an astonishing range of information about art, politics, curruption, finance.' *TIME*

'Twice as long as the ordinary thriller, and packed with good stuff all the way. Excellent value.' *GUARDIAN*

Francis Clifford

OVERDUE

In the Arizona desert night was slow to supplant the heat of the day. But for the small group of survivors from the crash of the plane there was no comfort in night's mask, no salvation from their plight. One of their number had a gun; a gun he was not afraid to use, for he was a condemned man. To him no life was sacred. And meanwhile those anxious for news underwent spiritual agony, with nothing to comfort them.

'As exciting a novel as I've read for a long time.'
TIME AND TIDE

'Ultra-exciting account of an aircraft crash in the Arizona desert . . . superbly staged.' *EVENING STANDARD*

'Horribly exciting.' *SPECTATOR*

'One you cannot possibly put down until the end.'
NEW YORK MIRROR

Of the author, the New York Times *had this to say: 'Not since Graham Greene was creating his adventures has there been a writer with such a haunting quality, the sweet sound of sad beauty which Clifford engenders . . . All of Clifford belongs on the connoisseur's bookshelf; he is unparalleled both in hovering suspense and distinguished style.'*

Jack Higgins

EAST OF DESOLATION

It proved to be one of those mysteries almost incapable of solution.

The plane that had crashed high up in the icy desert of a Greenland icecap had no passengers and barely any identity. On a flight from Newfoundland to Ireland, it had strayed fiercely off course, with no communication and no explanation.

Joe Martin was hired to fly to the scene of the crash by two insurance assessors and the beautiful widow of the pilot. But no-one quite trusted Martin, and for Martin, this distrust was mutual. Within a short time of arriving, he began to wonder whether a £50,000 insurance claim was the only thing at stake. And when some precious emeralds turned up and mystery turned into plain skullduggery, Martin had to act pretty fast in order to stay alive and well.

'A thrilling novel in the best traditions of Hammond Innes and Alistair Maclean.' *THE DAILY MAIL*

'Among the greats of the high adventure tellers.' *EVENING NEWS*

Exciting thrillers from Coronet

Francis Clifford

☐	02879 3	OVERDUE	17½p
☐	02309 0	ACT OF MERCY	25p
☐	15143 9	ALL MEN ARE LONELY NOW	25p
☐	15144 7	THE NAKED RUNNER	25p
☐	10886 X	TIME IS AN AMBUSH	25p

Jack Higgins

☐	12795 3	IN THE HOUR BEFORE MIDNIGHT	25p
☐	10699 9	THE VIOLENT ENEMY	20p
☐	15099 8	EAST OF DESOLATION	25p
☐	15122 6	NIGHT JUDGEMENT AT SINOS	30p

John D. MacDonald

☐	04461 6	THE LAST ONE LEFT	40p

Keith Wheeler

☐	12961 1	THE LAST MAYDAY	35p

All these books are available at your bookshop or newsagent, or can be ordered direct from the publisher. Just tick the titles you want and fill in the form below.

.....

CORONET BOOKS, Cash Sales Department, Kernick Industrial Estate, Penryn, Cornwall.

Please send cheque or postal order. No currency, and allow 5p per book (4p per book on orders of five copies and over), to cover the cost of postage and packing in U.K., 5p per copy overseas.

Name.....

Address.....

.....

It was to be the first mid-winter flight to the Arctic, the progressive step that Admiral Peter Canaris had waited a long time to take. A lot depended upon its total success – a young man's life, American prestige, and a code of duty between the men who were going to see it through.

But the vicious and wicked Arctic temperament was a force that Canaris could not hope to subdue. And it was waiting, as he knew and feared, coiled and ever ready to unleash its savage fury.

"This is a fine book, compelling on the physical level as well as the moral. It is to be hoped there will be many more of the same calibre." Auckland Star

CORONET BOOKS/HODDER PAPERBACKS LTD.

UNITED KINGDOM	30p
AUSTRALIA	90c
NEW ZEALAND	90c
SOUTH AFRICA	75c
CANADA	$1.25c

ISBN 0 340 12545 4